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BIG HAPPINESS

PAN

AUTHOR OF "WHITE HEAT"



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BIG HAPPINESS

BY
PAN

AUTHOR OF "WHITE HEAT," "SCORCHED SOULS," "WONDERFUL LOVE"
"LOVE THE MAGNET"

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PART THE FIRST

I

DIVES IN PARADISE

FROM the Jardins du Luxembourg you will be easily directed to the rue Paradise. All Paris knows the rue Paradise near to the Luxembourg. There was not so long ago perpetrated in it one of the most artistically contrived murders known to the criminologist.

The street has the air of a place which might well have risen to notoriety in such a way. Its appearance is a libel on its name. To begin with it is a mere side-turning of some three hundred yards in length, leading from a broad and well-nurtured thoroughfare to a maze of slum-like alleys. Among streets, it is a slattern; garbage sulking in its gutter and refuse strewing its cobbles. Of the three lamps it boasts, two have their glasses broken, and there is no light to be obtained from the third. As you enter it by night from the arc-light blaze of the broad thoroughfare that runs at right angles to it, you say to yourself, apropos of the artistically contrived murder: "Anything might be expected to happen in a hole like this!"

And yet, like most places unfortunate enough once to have earned an ill-reputation, the rue Paradise is essentially a street in which nothing ever does seem to happen. Day and night it is steeped in a lethargic calm. The few people who may be seen passing in and out of it have nothing of the criminal and the ruthless in their bearing. They seem to be amiable and law-abiding, gentle and even refined. If there is anything at all noticeable about them it is, maybe, that they are scarcely the sort of people you would expect to find in such a neighbourhood.

For, like the street, the houses that brought it into existence reflect no paradisial beauties. Those on the southern side remind one of nothing so much as of barracks. As a matter of fact, they were once intended as a part of a monster hotel, which was never completed. Bankruptcy stunted their growth. It has since never ceased to loom over them.

Divided up into flats, suites and single *appartements*, they clearly aim at sheltering persons fated with scantily filled purses. It is certainly recognised in the locality that the purses of the occupants boast little of their fulness. On the contrary, their periodical emptiness is the despair of such good citizens as have legal demand upon their contents. An address in the rue Paradise (near the Luxembourg) has become a *sine qua non* when it comes to such matters as cash on delivery.

Yet must you not imagine that here is collected in these barrack-like structures any community reduced to squalor and drab monotony of existence. Nothing would be further from the truth. Here nests a very diverse and interesting colony, the members of which only meet in circumstance, nature and present prospect upon the one common platform which acknowledges the unfortunate elusiveness of the nimble franc. For the rest, they seem to live very freely and well, being at times exceedingly sprucely dressed, and being commonly known to hail taxis when they have reached of nights the blaze of the well-lit thoroughfare at the corner.

Indeed, should you be tempted to make enquiries from any of the voluble concierges at the entrance to these buildings, you might learn many things of the occupants which would surprise you. Stories of the mighty fallen, of great reputations being quietly effaced, of heirs to fortunes waiting in the hope that their feet will fit into dead men's shoes. Chatter of this genius who is struggling at piano, or brush or chisel or pen to win eventual recognition and its longed-for aftermath of wealth; of that lodger whose thrifty days are counterbalanced by most splendid nights spent in the *salons* of very fine friends; of the number of names which figure on the concierges' lists and—they tell you with eloquent

shrugs of their shoulders—undoubtedly hide remarkable histories.

It is the boast of the freckled-faced old woman who presides at the door of *numéro 13*, that her house roofs the greatest personalities in the row. There is Battini, the prima donna from Milan, who was divorced four times. There is the English miladi who goes every year to Monte Carlo and, on her return, borrows each year the francs and centimes to pay for her cab from the station. There is the German professor who nearly blew up the building a fortnight ago, experimenting with explosives. And—she reserves to the last what she evidently regards as her tit-bit :

“ There is Mad'moiselle Defarges, on the same floor as the Englishman, Monsieur Johns—a quite cheap floor of suites very small but compact. Ah, the poor Mad'moiselle Lucille Defarges ! She is—because I am a good democrat, I am sorry for her—she is, m'sieur, really the daughter of a king ! Is it not a shame ? But what would you ? These kings—— ”

She had bitter views about kings and such-like, this old concierge. And, on a certain ill-weathered night in November, feeling no doubt rheumatically and bad-tempered, she had been giving vent to them on some excuse and with her scorn-lashing tongue, when a luxurious motor was driven hesitat-

ingly up the rue Paradise and eventually stopped with a great grinding of brakes at the door of No. 13.

From the lighted interior of the car a tall man stepped briskly on to the pavement. A thick fog surrounded everything with its winding-sheet. The tall man coughed as he stepped out into it, and wrapped a black silk scarf well round the lower part of his face, so that little but the eyes could be seen beneath the rim of his opera-hat.

He addressed the concierge in French which any Parisian would have unhesitatingly condemned as having been made in England.

"Monsieur Johns lives here?"

"*Mais, oui, m'sieur! Numéro vingt-deux——*"

"Thanks. He is in, I suppose?"

"*Mais, oui, m'sieur——*"

The tall man brushed past her. He had the personality which admits of no obstacles. The little fat concierge, evidently in a mind to protest with some urgent reason for less speed, appeared to fall a victim to this personality. Perhaps it was that she floundered in a maze of servility before the wealth that exuded from the visitor. She had a finer regard for the commands of Dives even than she had scorn for the words of kings.

At any rate, before she could do more than gasp, the tall man had commenced to ascend

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with business-like rapidity the iron stairway that led upwards to Monsieur Johns and *numéro vingt-deux*.

"Mother of God!" she mumbled as she stared through the fog at the magnificent motor. "With such a fine visitor, it is to be hoped that Monsieur Johns and the absinthe have not as yet——"

Meanwhile, the tall man had reached the door upon which a passage lamp had shown him dimly the number 22.

He knocked commandingly, and was answered from within by a voice which had in it a sharp note of surprised impatience.

The open door showed a sitting-room. Quite vaguely, partly because it was clouded with tobacco smoke, and partly because its only illumination came from a candle that, fanned by a draught from the open door, was spluttering badly in the neck of a bottle. Such as could be seen of the room, however, left an impression of indolent bachelor comfort.

Behind the table which was graced by the candle and its improvised bottle-holder, the occupant of the room sat, staring in a puzzled way at the open door and his visitor. He was not a young man, nor yet would you have set him down as old. On the right side of forty, you might have hazarded. Probably, because of the patch of grey that rather

vividly contrasted over his right temple with the rest of his coal-black hair. At the moment an expression of ill-temper marred what was otherwise an exceedingly interesting face. Very keen eyes, he had; a clear-cut nose, rather hawk-like; and a well-shaped mouth and firmly moulded chin were striking features which you would not fail to notice. Sitting hunched up at the other side of the table too as he was, you yet realised that he was of massive build. You could have imagined him, when standing, to be just about as tall as the man who had intruded, obviously, at an awkward moment. One of his hands, half raised, had been arrested in the act of lifting to his lips a glass in which shimmered that pearly, opalescent fluid which was too long the evil demon of Parisian life.

"Still—absinthe——!" jerked out the man at the door, which he had closed with his swift, certain movement of the hand.

The glass came to the table with a crash, and the man who sat there leaped to his feet.

"*Nom d'un chien——?*" he flung out with a gesture of incredulous amazement.

The sound of his voice was a perfect echo, in all but the words used, of the steely voice which had preceded it.

The man at the door slowly unwound the black silk scarf from the lower part of his face.

“ Well—John ? ” he said on a slightly amused note as he stepped up to the table.

The man on the other side lifted the bottle with its candle so that the light fell full upon the two of them.

“ James—— ! ” he laughed on a note which combined surprise with fear and yet with some faint indication of pleasure.

And, as he said the word, he might have been looking into a mirror and addressing the reflection of his own face.

II

CANDLELIGHT ON HIS MISSION

THERE was silence in the room, time enough for the visitor to remove his opera-hat and fur-lined overcoat and to lay both of them on a sofa.

The man beyond the table had sunk back limply into his chair. For a moment the two eyed each other without speaking. In the flickering candlelight their faces, so amazingly alike, made an uncanny picture, drawn out, as they were, from the surrounding gloom which seemed to hide everything else. The visitor was the first to speak.

"Well—John?" he repeated on his note of amusement. He pulled up an arm-chair to the opposite side of the table and settled himself comfortably into its depths.

"Well—James?" questioned the other cautiously, and watched him, plucking at his lower lip with uncertain fingers.

"Glad to see your brother?"

"Certainly! Always glad to see you. But you should have let me know you were coming. I——"

His eyes furtively travelled round the shadowed

untidiness of the room and ended by staring rather stupidly at the broken glass on the table in front of him.

"This isn't," he laughed weakly and apologetically, "quite the way I would have liked to receive my eminent brother, the great James Dant, financier, millionaire——"

The other leaned suddenly forward in his chair.

"I only made up my mind to come and see you a little over half an hour ago," he said.

"So that you come here still warm with the glow of brotherly affection which has prompted——"

"Was there ever any brotherly affection wasted between us, John?" barked the other.

John's uncertain fingers toyed fiercely with his nether lip. If you had observed him closely you would have drawn the wise conclusion that his apparent attitude of smiling deference had no depth. Behind the flimsy veil of it you could see signs of internal emotion, of a struggle going on at the back of his mind. At his brother's sharp question he seemed to be forced to a strong effort to hold that struggle well in hand. He did not answer for a moment. But, when he did it was still with that smiling deference and grand politeness which he had subtly adopted after once the shock of recognition had been over.

"No, James. I think not," he said softly. "In

fact, I suppose I may say, I am sure not. Why should there be, anyhow? You are a successful man. Success is the wind before which the candle of affection is most easily blown out. You have all the success. I have only the candle; and that, as you may see from this fortunately handy symbol on my table, burns in such surroundings of non-success that it must be somewhat indelicately enthroned in a bottle-neck for lack of more elegant provision."

"And why?" The face of the other was hard and stern, as that of his brother was soft and smiling. The same face, uncannily, as it were, exhibiting itself at the same moment in two entirely opposite moods. "And why this—bottle and candle and this—attic? Why are you living in this Paris—er—slum—under an assumed name? Whose fault is it? Your fault."

"My pleasure," murmured his brother on a soft note of correction. "I am quite happy, you know."

Very slowly, but not as though his action had any particularly deliberate connection with his statement, he filled another glass and sipped thirstily at its contents. The other watched him with cold scorn, interpreting the action in his own way.

"I can believe it," he said on his hard, metallic note. "I always said you would end in that. We began life together, you and I. You, just a few

minutes later than I, it is true. But you have had the same chances as I. The same money—to a penny—was left to you and to me. The same opportunities of using it were provided for you and for me. I——” His simple gesture seemed to indicate the greatness to which he had risen.

“ Well done, thou good and faithful servant ! ” mocked his brother softly, gazing with bright eyes into the opalescent shimmer of his absinthe.

“ And you ? ” lashed the other coldly. “ You flung away all your chances ! A dreamer, a shiftless ne’er-do-weel ! ”

“ All that—yes.”

“ You and I—together—if you had had any business stamina at all, could have twisted the world round our little fingers, as I have had to do—by myself. Sometimes I would have given anything to have had a brother by me to fight with me. As it was, I fought alone, and won. I win every time. And you—still clinging to your dreaming, shiftless ineptitude—you are hidden away on the top floor of a Paris slum—shirking even the responsibilities that might cling to the acknowledgment of your own name—dreaming—idling—still, I see, at your infernal absinthe—a damned soaker—— ! ”

The other rose slowly to his feet, so slowly that you understood his mood to be not a little dangerous.

"Did you come here to insult me, James?" he questioned very deliberately.

Note for note his voice had echoed his brother's. It was almost as if the same man had rasped out the accusations and followed them sharply with the cold question. The weird effect was not lessened in its force by the sight of the two faces leaning towards each other across the table.

A huge diamond stud flashed in the white shirt-front of the one as he turned abruptly away and walked to the window.

"No," he said in less truculent vein. "On the contrary, I came to do something for you."

The ill-fitting and carelessly worn clothes of the other shook as he laughed silently. Behind the back of his brother, who was staring out of the window without being able to see anything for fog, he lifted his absinthe glass to his lips and, nodding as to a silent toast, drained it dry.

"Which means," he said, "that, incidentally of course, I should have to do something for you."

"A matter of business, naturally——"

The other laughed on a suddenly harsh note.

"If it was anything important, it was as well you came to-night. To-morrow——" He shrugged his shoulders in the way one learns only after living in Paris. His brother, struck by his tone, had spun

round on his heel, watching the shrug with a puzzled frown.

"What about to-morrow?" he questioned sharply.

His brother had slipped limply into his chair and was twiddling his empty absinthe glass between slender fingers.

"I have come to the end of my money," he said simply.

"And—to-morrow—you must have borrowed——"

"Borrowed? My dear James, how little you understand me! Why should I borrow?"

"That is usually the last resource of people who will not work and yet must"—his finger was flung out expressively towards the absinthe glass—"feed."

The other shook his head slowly.

"No. I should not have been reduced to borrowing, James," he said softly, though once again you would have recognised from a flutter of his eyelashes, or a swift clenching of his hand, that he was suppressing fiercely a wave of hidden passion.

"Certainly not—money. I have never borrowed money in my life."

"Certainly not of me."

"Of nobody. But borrowed I have a great deal—from Life. I was only thinking when you knocked at my door just now that I ought to

make amends to Life, to pay up my overdrawn account—as I suppose you would call it with your dreadful business-like mind, James—in some way. It was merely the—method—I was rather worried about. Poison, or a bullet, or the Seine—not a bad river, by the way——”

His brother strode back to the table.

“ Good God ! ” he muttered hoarsely. Again the candlelight picked out of the darkness those two faces, so amazingly alike, and vividly contrasted the emotions that swept them. That above the soft collar and black silk artist’s bow—smiling as if its owner had not a real care in the world. The other, over a dress tie and expanse of white starched front—ceaselessly changing in expression as its owner’s mind moved to a new thought. First, it expressed horror, then scorn, then doubt, then was slowly lit by an inspiration which left it eventually sphinx-like behind its mask of cold, business ability.

“ There is no necessity for you to think of so ridiculous—— ”

“ If I *could* only think of something ridiculous, my dear James ! Some method which was merry and had humour in it ! Poison is so disagreeable to the taste. Bullets are messy things and leave an unkind sight behind them. As for the Seine—there is nothing to approach humour in the Seine ! ”

The other looked coldly at his watch, a diamond-studded thing fastened to a thick chain of gold. Jewels flashed on the third finger of his left hand as he waved it to silence his brother.

"This is fools' talk!" he snapped. "I have no time to waste on it. I have wasted too much already. For once, be so kind as to be serious. Stop this dreaming and humbugging sentiment and listen to me. This talk of suicide is——" He flicked the empty absinthe glass with his fingernail so that the musical ring of it made a rich note that seemed long in passing away.

"You must take your life in your hands and fling away—this——"

The glass, hurled by his hand, crashed against the wainscoting beneath the window.

"*That* is what is the cause of your—candles and bottles and attic and assumed name," he barked furiously. "*That* is what has been your ruin—that, working on a sentimental mind and a weak character. You know it. Another form of—*that*—was what practically hounded you out of London—disgraced—under the hammer. You know it. Now you haven't a penny in the world. I don't know what sort of grip that stuff has on you already. Anyhow, with starvation staring you in the face, John, you must pull yourself together and—put it behind you. If you can do that——"

"I suppose I should have to do it, under the circumstances——" murmured the other, regarding the fragments of the glass on the floor with a dolefully amused eye. He did not appear to be more than politely interested in the discussion. But his brother touched him for the first time since he had been in the room. The grip on his arm was so fierce and commanding that it seemed to awaken him out of a dream.

"To earn what I am prepared to offer you, John, it is a necessity that you—keep your wits about you, that you touch nothing to drug them, that you behave like a man——"

"And what, my dear James, are you prepared to offer me?" he questioned with a disconcerting gravity.

"A—practically—open cheque, a three weeks' tour on the Continent with luxurious travelling, the best hotels and"—he smiled his rather sad, twisted smile—"very pleasant company. And, afterwards—if you carry through my instructions in a proper manner—I will allow you for the rest of your life—shall we say, the same income that you have been drawing lately?"

"What must I do in return for this—very munificent and—you don't mind my saying so, do you?—rather Quixotic offer?"

The abruptness of the question seemed for a

moment to startle the financier. A man accustomed to watch that he was not taken unawares, he was evidently on this occasion unprepared. He lifted a nervous hand to his lower lip with just that same movement which was characteristic of his brother. The two men were, for the moment, doing precisely the same thing. It was uncanny.

Possibly the financier felt something of this, for he turned sharply on his heel, covertly dropping his hand which slid into his trouser pocket and there rattled silver coins with sudden energy. The chink of them was all that was heard in the room for a minute.

"It is necessary that I should sail for New York by the *President Faure* which leaves to-morrow before noon," he said presently. "It would, I am aware, be quite useless, John, to enter into any details as to this necessity. It is a business necessity. You profess to despise business. I——"

"Of course! You are the living personification of business, my dear James. I know you. The first tooth you cut was a business tooth. You have all the business bumps. You were keener on long tots than you were on eating your meals at school. I am afraid you will never get into heaven, where pounds, shillings and pence have no proportionate value. Do you know——"

He leaned suddenly forward and dropped his light tone of ironical banter.

"Do you know," he continued on a softer note, "I have always been rather glad never to read in the papers that you had married. I am quite certain that you would have taken the poor girl to the altar in the same spirit that you would carry away a scrip for stock. I——"

The other was gaping at him, open-mouthed.

"What the devil do you mean?" he was shouting, and suddenly froze to a chilly dignity.

"As a matter of fact, I was married this morning," he said in a moment.

His brother started, stared at him dubiously for a second, and then leaned slowly across the table.

"Then—to-night is your wedding-night?"

"Precisely."

"And to-morrow you are sailing for New York? That means that—you—oh, I see—your wife is going with you! You are going to combine business and connubial happiness! Very thoughtful! Your wife will——"

"My wife will remain here."

"A novel honeymoon, James! It rather bears out what I suggested just now, doesn't it? Of course, she may not mind very much——"

"She will not know," said the other deliberately, his hard eyes meeting defiantly the indolently laughing ones of his brother, who frowned in a puzzled way.

“ Not know ? My dear James—— ! Not know —— ? ”

The financier silenced the mocking laughter with a wave of his hand upon which the diamonds flashed aggressively.

“ Not if you accept my offer and do as I wish,” he said.

“ I ? ” laughed the other, apparently regarding the affair as a hoax. “ And where do I come in ? ”

“ You will take my place,” said the financier impatiently, as if surprised that any explanation should have been necessary.

And once more, as he said it, the candlelight flung into relief against the darkness those two faces so uncannily, feature for feature and line for line, a reflection each of the other.

III

SILHOUETTES ON A WALL

THE financier waited for a moment in silence. The fingers of his left hand, with their egregious diamonds all aflash, toyed nervously with the pearl buttons on his white waistcoat. He grew more and more uncomfortable under the steady regard of his brother's eyes as the seconds passed, and the silence became more pronounced.

"Well? Well?" he rasped impatiently, his clever face flushed with a visible annoyance. "Why don't you say something? Are you going to accept the offer? But of course you are! A man in your awkward position——"

"Wait a minute, my dear James! Wait a minute——!" drawled the other very softly. "Let me just make sure of my bearings. You were married to-day. This is the first night of your honeymoon. You have some business you want to do——"

"*Must* do."

"Must do—in New York. To do it you must sail on the——"

"*President Faure*——"

“ On the *President Faure* at midday to-morrow. That means that you must leave Paris——”

“ Shortly before midnight to-night.”

“ This is to be managed quite simply. You are to go off without your wife knowing. In fact, when I arrive at—wherever you are stopping—she will imagine I am you ? ”

“ Precisely,” snapped the financier impatiently.

The other rose dreamily from his seat in his slow way.

“ Too much business, oh, my brother, hath surely addled thy brain ! ” he remarked lightly. “ Unless thou art enjoying a joke at my expense. And, if that is so——”

The financier drew his watch from its pocket and glanced sharply at it.

“ It is now eleven o'clock,” he said curtly. “ You should know me well enough by this time, John, to remember that I am not in the habit of wasting precious hours on practical jokes. We have, as it is, scarcely sufficient time to arrange all the details which will ensure my plans being successfully carried through. They are, as a matter of fact, only roughly mapped out in my own mind. They will need perfecting and rounding off. The idea only came to me, as I told you, less than an hour ago. By good luck I happened to have on me a note of your address——”

His brother stopped suddenly in the act of lighting a cigarette.

"I am afraid I am very dull," he said quietly. "I really can't see why, because you must suddenly interrupt your honeymoon by going to America, you should be obliged to arrange matters in this melodramatic way. What on earth is to prevent you and your wife from enjoying a pleasant trip together across the herring-pond in your luxurious state cabins and each other's company? You don't anyhow for a moment think, do you, that a millionaire like James Dant is going to cross the Atlantic without the whole world knowing, leave alone his wife——"

The other threw out his hands in an angry gesture.

"Am I a fool?" he barked. "I am not going to the States as James Dant. I am going, not in any state cabin, but third class, as you would travel. In fact, I have already booked a passage by 'phone before coming here. It is booked in—the name you assume—J. Johns."

Through a blue cloud of smoke his brother studied him out of narrowed eyes. He leaned slightly forward on his toes as he stood, with a sudden air of alertness and suspicion. You would have noticed that the mask of lethargic stupidity had fallen slightly from his face, which allowed

in its expressions occasional glimpses of a mind working rapidly behind it.

"This idea of yours, James," he said suddenly, "is deeper than I thought. You have acted quickly upon it. It must, indeed, be urgent."

"It is urgent."

"And possibly productive of considerable results?"

"Very considerable results."

"Suppose you explain it to me."

"Why waste time?"

"Why, indeed, James? Why waste time? We can do nothing in this—Quixotic venture of yours until you do tell me. You see—of course, I have no mind for business and I may be quite wrong—but your suggestion that I should impose upon your newly married wife by taking advantage of our fortunate—or unfortunate—remarkable likeness to each other, seems to me to savour of—the unclean. Mind you, I quite understand that you intend the impersonation to be one—entirely nominal and—all that sort of thing. No doubt you are not yourself proposing to be an ardent husband. Knowing you, as I do, I can imagine that it would be very easy for me to assume to the life your natural rôle of flint-like business man who has discovered it profitable to provide himself with an attractive wife for

show purposes. But—she might not be of your mind——”

“Nonsense,” scoffed the other. “She married me for my money, for the position I could bring her——”

“Still, that does not lessen the—unsavouriness of the whole idea. It may neutralise the practical side of it. But the moral wrong——”

The financier sprang from the chair into which he had sunk impatiently whilst the other talked.

“A fine fellow you are to preach about moral wrong!” he blazed. “Look at this——!”

From his pocket he brought a leather case, and from it extracted a slip of paper which he held out under his brother’s eyes.

“Have you forgotten that?” he snarled angrily. “The cheque to which you—forged—my signature five years ago! I haven’t forgotten it—if you have——”

The other’s hand went for an instant to his eyes with a quick movement as of one who shuts out a blinding light. It fell again to his side, and nothing remained to be seen of any emotion except that perhaps his face was very pale.

“You are wrong, James,” he said quietly. “I have never forgotten that. The disgrace of it—and the temptation that prompted it—remain as vivid to-day as five years ago.”

“ And the crime hangs as much over your head to-day as then, if I liked to rake it up afresh and demand the penalties which the law administers, John. But I don't intend to do that. I did not drag in the subject here for any other reason than that a man, who can lower himself to forgery and robbery of his own brother, has no right to prate of moral wrong as though he defiled his hands which are already badly soiled. So far as I am concerned this cheque will be handed over to you to burn or do what you will with when—you have taken my offer and—done for me what I need. It seems to me that it was almost meant by Fate for the one thing to be the sequel of the other. It was this cheque, together with the difficulties in which your shiftless business stupidity had involved you, that—sent you away into hiding. I suppose there is scarcely a soul living to-day who knows James Dant's brother is alive. Not more than a couple of months ago I heard a man in the club declaring—and his statement was supported by other men—that you died in Canada from frost-bite two or three years ago. Prompted by some impulse, and knowing you would never come out again from your retirement, I went to the trouble of corroborating the statement. The story has spread effectively. So far as the world is concerned, you see, you are—wiped out. As for our likeness

to each other—well, almost every man in the world has his double somewhere or other, and chance likeness is no link between two men. The world in which you move does not meet my world. So long as we are far apart, and not seen together, nobody would dream of linking us by relationship.”

He leaned across the table, where the other sat hunched up in his chair, staring down at the floor out of unemotional eyes.

“That was what gave me my idea,” he continued. “You know the name of Bergenplatz? No! You are not interested in financial matters. That was why I did not want to go into any lengthy details. But perhaps I had better, after all. It would straighten out the situation. If you went back to Throgmorton Street to-day, you would hear no names more frequently mentioned than those of Dant and Bergenplatz. The market war between us has become—I flatter myself with every justification—historical. In yesterday’s phase of it, I had Bergenplatz hipped. He is to-day at work planning out a new attack. The first evidences of his offensive were in this morning’s papers, as a matter of fact. And it is a cute move, this new one of Bergenplatz. The full force of it will be felt by me, as he has cunningly anticipated, whilst I am out of the market, fooling about here on the Continent

on an idiotic honeymoon. You see my meaning ? ”

His brother nodded slowly, his narrowed eyes watching the clever face opposite him.

“ Now, you may argue that the obvious thing to do is to forgo the honeymoon ! That would be quite possible. I could easily return to London to-morrow and take up the cudgels against him in fair fight. But the only way to fight Bergenplatz effectively is to fight, as he does, from behind. For this, I have my plans cut and dried. It does not matter to you what those plans are. They are plans which I have often wanted to put into execution, but have never had opportunity because, as James Dant, I am always in the world’s eye, and that is just the one thing that prevents them from succeeding. They could be only carried through by me when the world—and Bergenplatz—thought me to be in quite another part of the earth and—paying no attention to business. What better time than upon my honeymoon ? Nobody, not even Bergenplatz, would think it possible that I would interrupt a honeymoon for business. Seeing me mooning about Europe for three weeks, Bergenplatz will feel quite at his ease. For my movements are all known to him. It is even possible that I was watched away from the hotel to-night. It is my hope that I have not been traced—here. That

I must risk. At any rate, when my car goes back to the hotel it will—to all appearances—contain James Dant, which will put them off the scent. Whilst the man known as Monsieur Johns will apparently pay here his—no doubt not inconsiderable arrears, and go aboard the *President Faure*——”

He paused for an instant, and then brought down his clenched hand on the table with a crash.

“And before the three weeks of that honeymoon are out, James Dant will have so rigged the market against Bergenplatz——” he continued with the fire of a big man anticipating big triumphs.

“But—if I will not be a party to this—thing?” questioned his brother quietly, but on a note which seemed to emphasise the existence of doubt.

“But you will.”

“Why should I, James?”

“Because you are at the end of your tether—broken.”

“Maybe. But, whilst you have been talking, I have been cogitating with myself, James. And—really, I do not think the Seine would be so bad after all. Quite good men have dropped quietly, before my time, into the Seine. It is not quite so muddy as the Thames, and certainly one’s last moments could be achieved with a sensational publicity which would help to lighten their

monotony. I think, after all, that a plunge into the Seine at some moment when the bridges are conveniently thronged would ensure for me at least an epitaph of wonder——”

“Don’t be a fool!” rasped the financier, stiffening his twitching lips, and clutching his brother’s arm in nervous fingers. “That filthy absinthe——”

“Ah, yes!” muttered the other on a sudden thought. “I had almost forgotten my dear absinthe!” He turned soft, dreamy eyes slowly to meet his brother’s. “You don’t understand what absinthe has been to me. You wouldn’t. That colossal business head of yours is too well audited to understand the loose book-keeping of my mind. And absinthe keeps the mind’s books but badly, I admit; though I have found him the friendliest of servants. He has made up for all I have lost. He has forgiven me the sins of my youth, and helped me to try to forget them. He has given to my eyes, that could not have found sleep without him, visions of things beautiful, of hopes realised, of desires fulfilled. Oh, I know you don’t understand this, James. Soaker, you call me——!”

He broke off suddenly and crouched down in his chair, his face buried in his hands. It was the first sign of any serious emotion he had given

during the whole interview. Presently, he looked up ; but not at his brother.

" It is a pity you mentioned absinthe," he said with a slow, whimsical smile. " And I was thinking seriously of the Seine. Absinthe is——"

" You cannot buy it without money," observed the financier on a cold note of reminder. " With an assured income for the rest of your life——"

He had his cheque-book open on the table before him, a fountain pen in his hand that tapped the nib on the wood so that ink might flow readily ; and his eyes watched his brother's profile.

The latter turned deliberately to look straight at him.

" You are—a—devil ! " he said slowly, and flung suddenly to his feet.

" You shall have your way ! You shall have your way, James ! " he continued abruptly, striding the uncarpeted floor upon which the Turkish slippers he wore made a slip-slop noise. And, stood suddenly still with folded arms and drawn to his full height.

" But not for the sake of absinthe," he said fiercely. " Not—particularly—for the sake of anything at all. Certainly not for your sake. Nor yet for mine. Nothing much matters to me. I don't care even if you make no amends to me for my—trouble—more than merely seeing that I am

furnished with sufficient filthy lucre to see the thing through properly. That is my mood to-night. It was my mood when you came in. For your purposes, you caught me just at the right moment. Upon my word, as the mood finds me, I rather envy you the wit that conceived such a merry adventure. For it has all the bones and sinew of adventure. The risks—there will be many risks for you and—certainly—for me. Moments when I may stand but a hair's breadth from discovery, maybe. I shall need wit then——”

He was speaking now with a light-heartedness that seemed almost feverish. His eyes shone with the light of excitement and his hands moved now here and now there with a swift, light touch of decisive activity.

“ Oh, I am in a devil of a mood to-night ! ” he said. “ I feel again to-night what I felt—— ” he hesitated for a moment and laughed rather noisily. “ But you wouldn't understand, and you don't want to know anything about what I might have been doing or feeling or thinking in all these years. You are full of business, James. Business, be it. Let us get right away down to business—— ”

His brother, appending with a flourish his signature to a cheque, looked up at him with an undisturbed astonishment. He opened his lips to speak,

but evidently curbed his tongue of what it itched to say or ask. He merely handed the cheque across the table. The other took it in his slender, artistic fingers, holding it near to the candle, the better to read it.

"They will cash it for you at the hotel," remarked the financier, putting away his cheque-book and fountain pen. "I have filled it in for an amount which—with criminal extravagance—should suffice amply between to-night and the end of the term of my absence. That should be just over three weeks from now. Possibly, if I can catch an earlier boat, it may be less. You may be certain that I shall relieve you of the strain of your position as soon as possible."

The other folded the cheque carefully between finger and thumb, laughing softly to himself.

"How do you know there will be any strain?" he questioned light-heartedly. "I do not think myself that such strain as may be will prove anything like unbearable. I may have no head for business, James, as you say. But this is no business man's job. It is the job for a—born rascal, a consummate hypocrite, a rogue adventurer——"

"I think—I am sure—I shall fill the rôle very well," he added with an almost pitiful catch in his breath. "Don't you?"

"I do," murmured the other drily, the while he

smoothed out upon the table a paper covered with rough pencil notes.

"I wonder," murmured his brother thoughtfully, "I wonder if you are right?"

"I am anxious to get on at once, John, with all the details which will make matters comparatively easy sailing for you," rasped the financier impatiently. "As soon as I thought of this plan in connection with you I scribbled down here a few rough notes of the arrangements, and some information which would be essential to you for you to carry out your part without fear of discovery—names and matters concerning the household, my servants, my wife, et cetera——"

"By the way, James," interrupted the other. "What is your wife's name?"

"She was a Miss Day. June Day," was the answer. "Of no family worth mentioning. No money at all. She has been, as a matter of fact, on the stage. And, very popular too, because of her beauty, I suppose——"

"She is beautiful?"

The financier drew himself up in his seat with an unconscious movement of self-satisfied possession.

"It was generally conceded," he said rather pompously, "that June Day was the most beautiful woman in London. I married her——"

“Quite,” said the other on a note of implied understanding. “And now—about these notes? I should like all the help I can get to carry out properly this job of a—born rascal, a consummate hypocrite, a rogue adventurer——”

PART THE SECOND

IV

GILT AND MIRRORS

HALF an hour later the luxurious motor which had been silently waiting outside the entrance to No. 13 of the rue Paradise (near the Luxembourg) throbbed into sudden life and—after much horn-blowing and grinding of clutches—slipped almost noiselessly away into the fog in the direction of that well-lit thoroughfare which runs athwart that sad little street.

Electric globes lit up the interior of the car, and its opera-hatted, fur-coated occupant could be seen leaning negligently back upon the cream upholstery, puffing a choice cigar and studying earnestly a sheet of paper.

The little fat concierge had just missed his departure, being in her lodge busily preparing the account of Monsieur Johns, the Englishman, who had given notice of immediate vacation of his rooms for some weeks. Which unexpected announcement would, under different circumstances, have greatly annoyed this rheumatically and exceedingly ill-tempered *maman*. But Monsieur Johns having been so

recently graced by the company of Dives, she wallowed in respect before him when he too, but afoot and carrying his well-worn valise, followed in the wake of the motor through the fog.

Which motor, leaving fast behind it the more or less drab picturesqueness that neighbours the Luxembourg, passed soon into the heart of the best part of Paris. Its fur-coated occupant, peering through the windows as he was carried through the broader, arc-lit thoroughfares, presently recognised well-known landmarks. The Place Vendôme, the rue Castiglione, the rue de Rivoli and such glimpses as the fog allowed of the glorious gardens of the Tuileries. Deep in thought, he became suddenly aware that the car was slackening pace.

It stopped in front of that fantastic portico of the Hotel Superbe, whose gorgeous flunkey was, in a moment, bowing beside the open door.

The brilliant lights beneath the glass-domed shade of the portico showed a cluster of people waiting on the marble steps, chatting vivaciously. They watched the occupant of the car stride rapidly into the hotel doors, some of them drawing aside out of his path with an obviously respectful interest.

"It is the English financier, Monsieur Dant," whispered one elderly Frenchman to a companion, who carried with him the atmosphere of the provinces. "Millionaire——"

In the entrance hall his attention was drawn to letters and a cable which had come for him in his absence. He took them with indifference, stuffing them into the pocket of his overcoat, and passed into the great painted glass and gilt winter garden, which was at this hour a remarkable scene. You had here an ever-moving picture of lovely women, exquisite toilets, elegant men. You carried with you at your first sight of it vivid cameos making up a gorgeous whole. Flesh-tint of arms and bare shoulders, peach-bloom of cheeks, carmine of laughing mouths, jewels flashing here and there, plumes nodding, light of eyes that glowed and twinkled, riot of colours.

Laughing groups chatted round little tables. Couples and parties wound their ways in search of sitting accommodation. The lights were of a dainty orange. The air was laden with the scent of flowers and alluring perfumes.

At the opposite side of the winter garden was a grand stairway, plush-carpeted on marble, and with a noble sweep of gilt balustrade to the right and left where it reached the first broad landing. Here was a lounge, also very live with well-dressed persons. An orchestra was playing in a distant corner of it, unseen and very dreamily pizzicato.

It was evident that most of the occupants of the lounge were resident in the hotel. They carried

themselves with that stir of possession which is natural to people who feel at home. The features, build and dress of them indicated a variety of nationalities, from Tokio—in a girdle round the world—to San Francisco. Over their tongues tripped many languages, especially English.

It was a fresh young English girl, one of a sextette of people which was grouped in an alcove to the left of the stairway, who exclaimed in her clear, refined voice :

“ Here is Mr. Dant ! He is looking about for us, over there by the top of the stairs ! ”

And, with her youthful energy born of excitement, she left the others on swift feet to run and meet the new arrival.

“ Oh, Mr. Dant ! We began to think you were never coming ! ” She laughed up in his face which was stern and preoccupied, and slipped her young rounded arm in his. “ We had a perfectly gorgeous time at the Odéon ! It was a ripping play ! All weepy and thrilly ! Only—I’m sure June was fearfully sorry you weren’t there—I think it’s perfectly dreadful that one should have to go and do stuffy business on one’s honeymoon——”

“ Yes. Yes, it is ! ” he murmured shortly, looking with a puzzled frown round the lounge. “ And—where is June ? ”

“ Just here. We are all here, and—oh, so tired !

I am anyway. Do you know, Mr. Dant, I thought I should never feel tired in Paris. I had an idea one never wanted to go to bed here."

"Well, of course—it depends, my dear," he said, a flicker of a faint smile softening his lips for an instant. It vanished as swiftly as it showed itself. For, by this time, he and the girl had arrived at the alcove and were face to face with the people who sat waiting for them. The pencil notes on the paper in his pocket, memorised so far as he had been able in so short a time, had provided him with details as to this party. His own instinct served to fit these details in with the personalities. The stout, fair woman in mauve was Lady Frances Frowle, without doubt. The child hanging on his arm would be no other than her daughter, Maisie. The man and woman on his left were Alick Crayshaw and his wife. Crayshaw was too notable a society figure not to be immediately recognised. Slightly behind the left of Lady Frowle a lithe, hale figure lounged on the edge of a settee. It might have been noticed that Mr. Dant started slightly as his eye gathered in details of this figure, and its owner's foreign features, which indicated that he must be the person written down on the pencilled paper as the Comte de Louvre. For the rest, there was no question of mistaking June, who sat next to the Comte.

As she looked up under her long black lashes at her husband, with the laughing Maisie playfully introducing him to her, he knew, with a catch in his breath, that he had never seen so beautiful a woman.

"I am sorry, dear, if I have been longer than I expected," he said. "The business——"

"Yes. I was afraid it might detain you," she said, and lowered her eyes suddenly, appearing to find something on her skirt that needed adjustment.

Talk sprang up with mushroom rapidity among the others. Lady Frowle was a vigorous chatter-box and loud-voiced. She seemed too to be on intimate terms with Mr. Dant, calling him "James dear." She wanted to motor out with Maisie to Rouen in the morning. The Comte would drive them. What were June and he proposing? The shops? Or, did he expect to be busy again?

No. He had no business on hand. He was quite indifferent as to what happened.

The Comte seemed sorry. He doubted whether Dant would be interested in Rouen. Dull place, he said.

Crayshaw thought it a beastly place. For himself, he meant to put in an appearance at the races at Chantilly. No programme worth shouting about; but there was a filly running that he had his eye on.

His wife had been promised that, whatever happened and especially if Alick had any luck in the afternoon, she would have a flutter to-morrow night at the Étaples tables.

Maisie was keen on the Louvre and the chocolate shops.

Lady Frowle thought it was high time Maisie was in bed. Which thought was tantamount to an order, and so the group began to break up.

In her loud voice she was full of complaints about the play, about Paris, about most things. She was a woman who evidently regarded the world through very yellow glasses. She bored Crayshaw excessively, so that he yawned rather rudely.

He had a horsey personality, and his little bird-like face seemed always to be turned this way or that on the outlook for something good.

"By the way, Dant," he said, as presently he tumbled lazily out of his low chair. "Want to get a word with you to-morrow. French chap told me about some shares to-day—jolly fine thing, I should think——"

June had risen languidly from her settee.

"Awfully tired," she was saying in her musical voice to Lady Frowle, who patted the girl's dainty shoulder with her fat, much beringed hands.

"I expect you are, dear. All the excitement

and the journey and the play this evening—such a dreadfully boring play too—but—to-night——!”

She leaned forward and whispered busily for an instant into the girl's ear, laughing in her hearty way on a note of hilarious mirth.

Very slowly, the two and Mrs. Crayshaw passed together out of the lounge through wide-flung doors that showed a broad, thickly carpeted corridor. In going, June did not look back at her husband.

Who followed after some minutes, button-holed by Crayshaw, volubly taking time and opportunity by the forelock on behalf of those jolly fine shares. He bristled with figures and percentages provided by his French informant.

“What do you think, Dant? I've a thousand or two to spare. If you thought it wouldn't be absolutely chucked down the damned gutter——”

“Tell you to-morrow, Crayshaw,” said the other. “So far as I can say without looking up my data—there's money in them. Yes, there's money in them——”

Which was a pretty safe expression of opinion, seeing that it did not qualify that money either as profit or loss.

“But, of course,” he added wisely. “It is always best to be quite certain of your ground.

Rashness, my dear Crayshaw, is the essence of bad finance. Take it from me."

"My dear Dant! You know. Of course! Still—I'm a sport, you know; and I don't whimper over risks. You've got to take risks—if you're anything of a sport—into account all the time, haven't you?"

"All the time," murmured the other drily. "Risks——"

"Well, let's have a night-cap just to celebrate the risks!" laughed Crayshaw, peering round him with his little bird-like face. "I seem to remember there's a buffet somewhere handy——"

"Not to-night, old chap, thanks," refused the other, coming to a standstill outside a door. "I'm fit for bed——"

Crayshaw boasted an unmusical laugh.

"Ha, ha!" he spluttered with a knowing wink. "My dear old chap—what was I thinking of! Good night and good luck! What an ass I am! What an ass——!"

As he strutted off down the corridor, the other turned to the door outside which he stood.

"You are," he muttered to himself drily, and turned in the lock the key he had taken from his waistcoat pocket.

The bedroom was huge and luxuriously furnished. Its imposing magnificence would have been not

altogether commonplace in a king's palace. At one end of it, through an open door, could be heard the distant trickling of bath water. A bed-suit was stretched ready for wear on the bed's silken coverlet. A very fine dressing-gown was thrown across the back of a settee. Slippers were ready for wear on the carpet. At the other end of the room, a second door was also open. One had through it a glimpse of an apartment in which mirrors and gilded furniture symbolised a rich treatment in decoration and upholstery.

From this room came suddenly, with the silent footsteps of the professional servitor, an elderly man.

This was Watson, who had been valet to Mr. Dant for several years. The pencilled notes on that slip of paper had been very precise in their detail of Watson and his methodical ways. A valet of some services is inclined to be particular, and apt to notice small things.

"Madame has just dismissed her maid for the night, sir," he said in his cat-like purr, assisting with the removal of the fur-lined overcoat to its proper place.

"Thanks, Watson."

The valet looked for an instant at his master's face, scrutinising it with the privileged effrontery of his class.

"You sound tired, sir," he suggested.

"I am. Quite tired."

"The weather, I expect, sir."

"Possibly."

Idly, he had passed from his bedroom into the sitting-room beyond the open door. Watson, after pottering about for a minute, followed presently in his wake.

"These letters and telegram were in your overcoat pocket, sir."

"Oh, thanks!" He took them with a frown at his forgetfulness.

"Anything I can get you, sir?" questioned Watson, standing in his stiff way near the chair into which his master had thrown himself with a sigh of relief.

"Yes. I think—an—absin—no! I will have a stiff brandy and soda—and some sandwiches."

"Very well, sir."

The door closed behind him.

"*Nom de Dieu!*" whispered the other, looking around the apartment with amused eyes. "We—do ourselves well—very well! I feel that I shall find life very——"

Moving about the room with a gentle curiosity, he seemed to become suddenly aware of the letters and cable in his hand.

"I wonder what Life has to tell me in these?" he

asked himself, walking with them to the hearth, where he stood, opening them, in front of the pleasant fire.

They were business letters, type-written and full of figures. Three of them were from the office of "James Dant" in Throgmorton Street. They did not interest their reader at all. He put them, however, carefully away in the pocket of his dress-coat. His finger tore the flimsy envelope of the cablegram. It contained only one word, and that a meaningless one.

"Code!" he laughed, flinging the crumpled envelope into the fire, and pushing the cablegram after the letters.

Everything just now, he thought, was like that code-word. Indecipherable, problematic. That code-word might spell good news. It might spell disaster. It might just mean a friendly how-d'ye-do? That was perhaps the most easy-minded way of looking at it. It was the way he must look at everything for the next few weeks. He was glad they were only few——

Watson returned at this moment with a salver. Decanter, syphon, and plate of daintily cut sandwiches of assorted variety had a kindly appearance. They appealed to his body which hungered and was athirst.

"Thank you, Watson," he said, leaning languidly

on the mantel. The valet was in the act of pouring the rich liqueur brandy from the decanter.

"Never mind, Watson," he forestalled him. "I will see to that myself. I shall not want anything else——"

"Your bath—clothes, sir——?" questioned the valet dubiously; and with a perturbed glance in the direction of the bedroom.

"Not to-night. I can manage excellently by myself, thanks. You—you had better get to bed yourself. You have had a tiring day—like me. Get off to rest as fast as you can."

"Thank you kindly, sir."

The valet withdrew, it is true, in the direction of the bedroom; but he went with an evident reluctance and some faint show of surprise. As much as he permitted himself (being a well-trained valet) to exhibit of surprise, shone from his eyes as he regarded his master doubtfully from the threshold of the bedroom door.

"If there should be anything you were wanting later, sir"—he suggested hesitantly—"the bell over your bed, sir——"

"I shan't want you again to-night, Watson," was the decisive answer he received.

He passed into the bedroom and attended perfunctorily to one or two details. Then, carrying his master's fur-lined overcoat and a brush, he

glanced nervously for a moment through the open door to where his master was sitting in the next room.

"Most extraordinary good-tempered!" he mumbled to himself, and went out into the corridor, turning the door-handle behind him with scrupulous care to be sure that the lock had caught properly.

Meanwhile his master sat in front of the fire, staring with unseeing eyes into the dancing flames. Now and again he had stretched out a hand towards the pile of sandwiches which had consequently become much diminished in size. He was intensely hungry, without doubt.

Thirsty too; for he poured himself out a stiff brandy peg, diluted it with soda and quaffed it at a gulp.

"Better!" he muttered, eyeing the empty glass as does a thankful man a kind friend. He rose from his seat and began aimlessly to pace the carpet. He seemed still to find an almost childish fascination in studying the room and its furnishings, the glimpse through the open door of his bedroom and its appointments. On the opposite side of the sitting-room a cream and gilt door was closed; but he had a very good idea to where it led.

From it he looked down at the fire out of eyes

in which stern fear fought with the laughter of indifference.

"The job of a born rascal, a consummate hypocrite, a rogue adventurer," he murmured to himself. "I wish I hadn't—but I did, so what does anything else matter? By now——"

He looked up at the ormolu clock on the mantel. The hands of it pointed to past one o'clock. He knew that, at this moment, the boat train was well on its swift way to the coast, carrying among other passengers, a Monsieur Johns, traveller to New York. It was too late now to wish. All that was left now amounted to no more than hope.

And, at the sight of his own face in a mirror before him, he laughed. Perhaps, after all, it was not so ticklish a job as he had imagined. The arrangements had all been so thoroughly and carefully made. Not a loop-hole had been left through which one might see from this hotel to No. 13 of the rue Paradise, or back again. And there was always the living indisputable evidence of that face that looked across at him from the glass. The face of James Dant, financier, millionaire.

Watson had come and seen and gone, undoubting.

Down there in the lounge the first skirmish with all the principal people involved in this comedy had resulted in no remark.

June herself had looked him right in the eyes, as he had looked into hers. She was blind as the others. He was certain of it. In fact, the recognition of it had, at the time, done much to ease his mind. She had certainly not married James Dant for love. A woman really in love with a man would know him instinctively. Not all the subterfuge in the world would deceive her. No. June, at least, was not in love. She had, he had little doubt, married James Dant, financier, millionaire, for his wealth, status, the reflection of his great name.

It was, he thought, an indifferent world to live in. A world that trafficked with the nuptial sacrament, disembowelling it and making use only of its outward form; giving bad goods the stolen trademark of better ware. Himself, he knew little enough about marriage, had never given it a thought or care. But, if marriage had chanced to come to him, he was certain, it would not have been marriage of this sort. It would have known no closed door between——

Impatiently, he poured himself out a second stiff drink of brandy, adding soda from the syphon which sizzled with a loud hiss through the quiet room.

• And prevented him from hearing that the closed door had been opened behind him.

“ To—the—business ! ” he toasted with a hoarse, jerky laugh, and returned the empty glass to the salver.

When, turning suddenly on his heel, he found himself confronted by June.

V

BROKEN SKYLIGHTS

THE sight of her took him entirely by surprise. Hearing from Watson that she had dismissed her maid, he had taken it for granted that she had already retired to bed. But she still wore the dainty toilette in which he had seen her downstairs, even to the jewels that sparkled on neck and arms and fingers. He was no woman's man, but he could not help but feel a thrill of admiration for the beauty those silks and laces and trinkets adorned. At the same time he realised that her sudden invasion of this room promised complications. To what extent? he wondered.

"I heard you moving about, James," she was saying in an abrupt, breathless way, which his perturbed mind understood vaguely to cover intense inward emotion. "I wanted to speak to you before—before I went to bed."

"Well——!" he smiled. "There is nothing unusual in the idea, surely? This room is——"

"It is yours," she said coldly. "But I will not keep you a minute."

“ Won’t you—sit down ? ” he suggested, indicating a lounge seat on the right of the fire.

“ I would rather not.”

He bit his lip, not in vexation but to kill the germ of a smile that threatened to grow inopportunately on them. At least she exhibited an accommodating desire to be unpleasant, which would make matters easier for him rather than the reverse.

“ Very well,” he said with a proportionate accent of formality, and waited for her to speak. Nothing among the rough pencil notes on that slip of paper in his pocket could guide him in his attitude towards June. There was nothing for him to do but to take a firm hold of his wit and keep it always ready. And his wits suggested wariness.

He could see now that she was angry. The flame of her temper had scorched the lovely dimpled cheeks of her, a vivid streak on each. One little white hand was fast clenched, holding a pleat in her full skirt. The other toyed viciously with a string of pearls at her throat. Her deep violet eyes were tensely narrowed, dark storm-clouds out of which lightnings flashed as they met his. There was a fighting spirit in the imperious tilt of her head, with its hair which was like copper and gold in an angry sunset.

Here, he said to himself, is someone else who is in a devil of a mood this night !

"I think we should clearly understand each other, James," she began very quietly. In fact, her voice—so evidently restrained to an almost unbearable pitch—came from her lips in little more than a hoarse whisper.

"The only thing which is clear at present is that we are—man and wife. That, to some people, means a great deal. To others, nothing beyond a formality. That last, of course, is practically what it amounts to with us."

"I have not said so," he corrected, but without looking directly at her. She shrugged her smooth shoulders, the fair flesh of which gleamed in the subdued light.

"That is a quibble," she said hotly. "The nature of our engagement and marriage so far as you are concerned has been proved by a long succession of incidents which leave no doubt in my mind. The last of them—what happened to-night—is, to me, crowning evidence of the farce which to-day you and I played out in St. Margaret's, Westminster."

"To-night?" he questioned gravely. "To what do you refer?"

She flung out a scornful hand towards the table with its salver and decanter and syphon.

"A moment ago," she said, "I overheard you toasting to yourself the only thing for which you

live, it seems ; the one thing that you appear to regard with any deep feeling—business ! ”

His hand went with a nervous gesture to his nether lip, tugging at it in that way which was one of James Dant's most noticeable habits.

“ I believe there are many men,” she continued on her tense note of half-stifled emotion, “ who would marry lightheartedly for formality's sake, but who would yet hesitate to leave their wives for a business appointment for the first hours of their honeymoon.”

He threw out a gesture of protest, but she gave him no time to speak.

“ It was an insult ! ” she flamed angrily. “ It was the kind of insult no woman would ever forget, ever forgive. It would have been an ill-bred action in an unknown ordinary man. It became an unspeakable outrage in a man like yourself, whose name is on everyone's lips, whose face is known to every Tom, Dick and Harry ! Even though you regarded our marriage as a formality—why, for the very reason that it was a formality—you can offer me no excuse for this slight ! The formality of marriage does not come to an abrupt end with the signing of a register in the vestry. The marriage may end there, but the formality goes on. And these people among whom you move are the first people in the world to notice any departure from

it. Do you think the Crayshaws and the Frowles—even little Maisie—were not sneering up their sleeves to-night when you bundled me off in their company, while you yourself hustled away on your precious business that could not wait even until the first twenty-four hours of our honeymoon were over? ”

“ I am sorry you should have taken it in that way,” he said softly. In his own mind the justice of her accusation burned clearly. He wanted to tell her so. He wanted to apologise in no stinted terms to this beautiful young girl who was smarting with every justification under an insult which had been as deliberate as it was wholly ungentlemanly. But he had not only himself and his own opinions to think of. He had to remember who he was, what he was. He had especially to maintain that chill air of stern callousness which was the cloak in which James Dant, financier and millionaire, habitually wrapped himself. The attitude for James Dant to adopt at this moment was undoubtedly one of lofty regret and comforting explanation. Therefore being, as he said, a consummate hypocrite, this echo of James Dant adopted that attitude.

“ It is a pity you have taken it in that way, June,” he said with a fitting pomposity. “ Never have you made a greater or a more cruel mistake.

I am—above everything—a man who meets his obligations——”

He stumbled drily. It is no easy task to fight another man's battles for him, especially if they be battles arising out of prejudiced and tainted causes.

“Your obligations to your wife stand at least level with those you may have towards your business,” she interrupted coldly, “especially in view of the fact that you married me for—purely business reasons——”

“Oh, no! You are quite wrong, June!”

“Then shall I say—to flatter your self-conceit and incidentally to assist your business? Oh, I have no illusions about it, James! I know! I know more than that! Why do you think I married you?”

James Dant's chilly version of the matter left no room for doubt. She had married him for his wealth, for the position he could bring her. But that would be a statement not easy to make to her face in cold words.

This echo of James Dant overcame his scruples by hedging:

“Supposing you tell me why you—so greatly honoured me?” he murmured on a note of banter such as one would use to soothe a refractory child.

She stepped swiftly up to him, a tense little figure, white-faced, stern-lipped.

“ Because you told my father that, if I did not, you would have him flung into gaol. . . . Oh, I know ! You thought I should never find that out. I will give you credit for that. You made that effort to save my self-respect. And—from father—I did not learn that I was sold to save what—small percentage of honour he has to his credit. You see, I do not flatter myself on the score of my parentage. I have always realised the shadiness of my father’s reputation. Even if I had not learnt the truth, I think I should have wondered all my life why you ever wanted to marry me. I never intended to let it happen, to tell you the truth. You never interested me. Your type of man doesn’t. I have a perfect horror of winter and ice and cold things. June is my month. June and roses and sunshine and happy things. When they told me that they believed you wanted to marry me, I laughed. When I saw for myself that you meant it, I felt like screaming. When you told my father the blunt truth on your yacht, there was nothing between you and me but a broken pane of glass in a skylight. . . . ”

Her face was hidden in her little hands. He watched her quivering shoulders with a queer choking sensation in his throat. For the life of

him he could not speak to her. This revelation of secret history fascinated whilst it staggered him, to whom James Dant had said nothing of it.

“ I owed my father life, education, some happiness of childhood, other things. . . . To me he was not a bad man. He had at least—a kind heart. . . . That skylight won you your battle, stole for you your coveted goods, added to your business reputation. Very easily, my father escaped—Dartmoor. . . . But, God ! . . . God ! At what price ? ”

She shook the scalding salt of her tears from great flaming eyes, turning round on him like a young panther, silky, sleek and dangerous.

“ Let us understand each other ! ” she demanded. “ Your wife I am. A wife, bought. And, bought with her eyes open. I have no complaint to make on that score. I dare say, if it had not been for what happened to-night, I should never have told you. I meant to stand by the obligations of to-day’s farce loyally, however distasteful and repugnant to me. I married you to save my father. I was payment for his debt. I intended it to be good payment. I meant to fulfil every word of my troth—literally. Till to-night——

“ And after what happened to-night ”—she continued in a hoarse whisper—“ I intend to act towards you as you have towards me. I will value

myself as, it is evident, you value me. I am a business proposition. I am the woman whom you have selected as sufficiently good-looking to dress well, sufficiently capable to direct your domestic affairs, wellbred enough to provide entertainment for your guests. You see, I know what you want ! I shall fulfil it all in a way with which you can find no fault. Your vanity shall be flattered, and you shall feel that the home you gave me, and the expense you incur through me, are all amply repaid. You shall collect good sterling interest for my father's debt. I will pay back the price of my father's honour, the reward demanded of your silence, on strictly business lines. But—that is all. . . .”

“ This evening, on the way from Calais,” she added, with a catch in her breath and turning away her face and lowered eyes with a quick, half-shamed movement, “ you talked of what you hoped from our life together, of what the future might bring, of your great ambition that your name and work should not die with you, that an heir——

“ Understand me ”—she flamed at him, clenched little fists pressed protectingly against her breast—“ understand me—that will never be ! All these other things I will do. If they do not suffice I will do more—anything that your business mind may conceive necessary. But—do you lay a hand on

me—do you try to force upon me more than that——”

Her shaking fingers were stretched out to clutch the handle of the door through which she had come, and against the cream and gilt of which she stood out, defiant, the embodiment of a fine scorn.

“And—I will—surely—kill myself,” she said slowly, and passed out of the room.

From the other side of the closed door the key was turned with a loud grating noise.

“*Nom de Dieu!*” murmured the man on the hearth with a breathless excitement. He was not quite certain in his own mind what James Dant should have done under these circumstances. He hoped—no more than he had done, which had amounted to nothing more than standing with an unemotional passivity before the storm.

“At any rate,” he thought, “I do know now how we stand—she and I! There is no necessity to be troubled in mind over any moral complications, which is fortunate. For the next three weeks, I can foresee a period of conveniently strained relationships, of frigid politeness and the like. Quite a jolly time, la, la!”

He was about amiably to pour himself out a third libation from the decanter. But, with it

held, unstoppered, in his hand, he suddenly set it back sharply on the salver, and crossed with swift, silent steps to the door through which June had left him, leaning his ear against it with a frowning eagerness which changed, as he listened, to awe and pity.

As he had imagined, she was moaning softly, there on the other side of that callous wooden door, maybe rocking herself to and fro with face hidden in little white hands. . . . Instinctively, his hand went out to the door-handle, which rattled slightly as he turned it. The sobbing suddenly ceased. . . . When he heard it again, it came less distinctly from a greater distance. She had evidently passed through into her own bedroom. In the silence he could hear, very muffled, the closing of another door. . . .

He came back to the table with its decanter and syphon and glass waiting to be filled. He stared at them for a moment and automatically stretched out his hand again for the decanter. With his drink to his lips he caught the reflection of his face in the mirror which had shown it to him once before that night. He walked slowly towards it, addressing it in a loud voice which rang uncannily through the lofty room :

“ James Dant, let me tell you what I think of you ! It is summed up in a word. Devil ! And,

saying it, I'm not angry with you. No. I'm sorry for you. You were made good, like everything else that is of God's making. It has pleased you to become bad, thoroughly bad. The great spirit that was given you at birth, you have battered and crushed into a twisted, nauseous thing. Presently, it will become so twisted and nauseous that God will not be able to stand the sight of it any longer. And he will kill the foul body that holds it. And then you will have to begin again. That hell-doomed spirit of yours will realise too late what heaven it has lost in this life. I am sorry for you. I am sorrier than I am for that poor little thing in her room away there. For she is good and clean and pure of the filth of your Mammon stains. And God will surely be kind to her, whatever you do or say. But you have run down the steep cliff into the sea from which there is no return. You are in hell now, if you only knew it. Lust of money and what money will bring has pushed you into the trap. So long as you lust you will never come out of it. And, knowing you, I am afraid you will always lust, until God—your sands of chance run out—takes back abruptly that spirit which He gave you, in very anger that His name, as Maker, should be slandered by the horror of its foulness. And, in that hour, I would rather not be you. . . . It may be that God's last chance is with you now,

that He has linked the life of that poor young thing in—there—with yours for a deliberate purpose. Perhaps you have already thrown away that chance to-night. God knows. He must be tired of you. I am. . . .”

Abruptly, he turned from the mirror as from something loathsome and disquieting. The sound of his own voice seemed to startle him, and he looked round the room as if he had awakened suddenly from a sleep and was asking the source of the echo.

“And a nice beauty I am to talk about God!” he muttered with a dry laugh.

“A job for a—born rascal, a consummate hypocrite, a rogue adventurer . . .” he mumbled, gulping down his drink.

Presently, comfortably stretched in his sumptuous bed, he switched out the light and lay for a while in the darkness.

“And there were two or three francs’ worth of absinthe left behind in that bottle!” he murmured with sleepy dolefulness.

VI

BABY EYES

It is a foolish custom which invariably belittles and seeks to stifle the opinions of the child. If we could only bring ourselves to realise it, children are given us as glasses to aid our vision which, with the toll of our years, has grown blurred and often very much out of focus. The child's outlook on life is fresh and clear. Its brain too has an unprejudiced newness of understanding. Eye and mind combine in a clear-burning wisdom beside which ours is a guttering candle.

That stale old maxim, "Little girls should be seen and not heard," were wisest expunged from the curriculum of parenthood.

It was a well-worn platitude on the lips of Lady Frowle, whom Nature, seeing that she was herself a somewhat stupid and dull-minded woman, had provided with a quick-witted and opinionated daughter. Which benefit her Ladyship did not regard with enthusiasm. On the contrary, she felt it to be her maternal duty perpetually to soft-pedal the clear notes of her child's young wisdom. As, for instance :

“How many times am I to remind you, Maisie, that little girls should be silent in the presence of their elders?”

And Maisie, shaking her coil of brown hair which had recently promoted her from the period of pig-tail to the long-coveted era of flapperdom, would pout:

“I am not little! I am as tall as you! You are always telling me that I must not do this and that because I am getting quite grown up now. I can't be both at the same time, can I?”

And to-day she added, rather petulantly:

“Besides, I only said that I thought Mr. Dant was ever so much nicer since he had been married. And it's quite true. He wasn't a bit nice in London. And all this week he's been as jolly as can be to—me. I——”

“You must learn, Maisie, to keep your thoughts to yourself. There are times when it may be embarrassing——”

Lady Frowle, with a sigh of acute distress, looked apologetically towards the open window, where June stood in subdued conversation with the Comte de Louvre.

“Well!” sniffed Maisie, swinging long legs over the arm of a chair on which she was dangerously balanced, “I am beginning really to like Mr. Dant——”

At which moment the door opened and he came into the room.

He looked well. A week of very open-air life and idle pleasure had tanned his cheek. It seemed, if you had looked closely, to have humanised his naturally rather stern face. His eyes had lost something of their usual keen, calculating hardness, and the firm line of his mouth was, at this moment, actually softened by a smile as he watched Maisie, taken by surprise, tumbling precipitately from her perch on the chair-arm.

He was, as a matter of fact, feeling very well, very fit and very easy in mind. Days ago now he had passed over that stage when his contact with these people had carried with it a feeling of perpetual danger. By now he knew that he was perfectly safe. From talking, acting, watching warily, he had passed into a phase of indifferent enjoyment of life. He was making a magnificent James Dant. In fact, he had practically convinced himself that he was James Dant. No foreign, but an entirely natural note struck his ear when the bored voice of Lady Frowle greeted him by name from the corner where she sat.

"James dear, I am sure I must have won quite a lot of money!" she suggested.

It would perhaps be as well to mention that they were on the Chantilly race-course. Through the

open windows of their *loge* on the Grand Stand drifted the roar of an excited multitude. The distant neighing of horses and the occasional clanging of a bell gave oral evidence as to the surroundings.

"Won? My dear Frances, you have lost! I expect your horse has completed the course by now; but, when I came away"—he laughed drily, waving with an eloquent gesture of despair his hand which held a roll of paper money.

"And me?" urged Maisie, drowning with her eager young voice her mother's little blasé pipe of complaint against her never-ending struggle against bad luck.

"You?" He tantalised the lively girl, who danced excitedly in front of him, studying a slip of paper with exaggerated melancholy. "Let me see! You backed——"

"'Fille Jeune' for a place! She came in, either second or third, Mr. Dant! I saw her!"

"Did you? Then I suppose you were right. Yes, you were right! She came in third! But the totalisator absolutely refuses to pay for a third place horse to a little English girl who ought to know better than to gamble away her pocket-money in this scandalous fashion——"

"Oh, Mr. Dant——!" she pleaded.

He fumbled with his hoard of paper money.

“ But I managed to persuade them ! ” he laughed. “ It was a very tough job. One of the toughest jobs I have ever undertaken—— ” Was it by chance that, as he spoke, his earnest eyes were looking, not at the eager girl in front of him but to where June stood in the window, talking to the Comte de Louvre ?

“ However,” he laughed. “ Here you are ! Five francs you gave me. Three to one chances. In all, twenty francs. Now don’t spend it all at once, child ! ”

He crossed to the window.

“ I put something on for you, June,” he said.

She turned to him with a detached air and smiled politely.

“ Yes ? ”

“ On ‘ Honeymoon.’ ”

The Comte, lounging against the window-frame, laughed softly.

“ So very appropriate, my friend ! ” he said in his voice which was smooth and musical, and in his English which was so undoubtedly made in Paris.

“ As profitable, may one hope, as—the reality ? ”

“ Quite profitable. She was an absolute outsider. Twenty to one chances. And she romped home. You have not apparently been paying much attention to the racing, de Louvre, or you would have noticed—— ”

“ Madame and I were, I am afraid, talking—— ”
The Comte spread out his eloquent hands which he was rather fond of exhibiting for the effect of their shapeliness and excellently manicured condition. The other regarded him with his mask-like smile. He evidently did not altogether like this Frenchman. The sallow face, with its slightly Roman nose and big, brown eyes, was certainly disagreeably handsome, and the grace with which he carried himself was too feminine to be attractive in a man. His air of familiarity reminded one instinctively of a ready-made suit in the window of a cheap clothier's shop. It was well-creased and precise in outline ; but its fit was vague.

“ As a matter of fact,” said the Frenchman, “ madame and I were talking about honeymoons.”

“ It sounds almost like an example of—is it clairvoyance ? ” laughed the other, addressing June, whose earnest eyes he had suddenly interrupted in a steady and puzzled regard of him. “ You and de Louvre were talking about honeymoons, and I was inspired to turn one to profitable use at apparently the same moment—— ”

“ Which was rather natural to you, James,” laughed June on her rich, cynical note. He rustled the paper money in his hand.

“ Here is my *apologia*,” he said quietly, handing her the roll. “ Twenty to one chances with a thou-

sand francs on represent quite a nice little instalment of pin-money, what ? ”

She took the notes with a smile of thanks.

“ How fortunate I am,” she murmured, toying with them idly between her slender fingers as they lay in her lap.

“ And also how fortunate is your husband,” suggested the Comte suavely. And, seeing that the husband’s attention was fully occupied with Maisie Frowle, who wished to have the totalisator and its workings described to her in detail, he added to June under his breath :

“ I would give worlds to be half as fortunate myself, dear lady.”

She was looking out through the open window over the course and the huge crowds that paraded its enclosures and ringed it with a thick, multi-coloured frame in those parts where one may pay little for standing accommodation. A new race—the last one on the programme—was on the point of being concluded. The crowd was hoarse with excitement and expectation. Whilst she looked, the horses swept past the winning-post to a tumultuous roar of cheering.

“ I think we ought to be going,” she said abruptly, and rose from her chair.

“ Yes,” murmured the Comte. “ Before the crush. A good idea—— ”

He crossed the *loge* with his quick, furtive tread.

"I am going to get the cars, Dant," he said, interrupting impatiently the discussion of figures out of the maze of which Maisie was gleaning illustrations on the principles of the state betting machine.

"Good!" agreed her instructor amiably. He was happily indifferent to anything that happened, this James Dant. A city man cheerfully rid of the city and anything approaching the stereotyped. From here the party was to motor on to the Comte's château near Compiègne where the night was to be spent; and perhaps the next day, after which an adjournment, if one may use the word, was to be made to Switzerland. Where they went mattered little to this James Dant, so long as they got away from Paris. He breathed already more freely for leaving behind him the inimitable atmosphere of Paris.

June was undergoing what would probably prove a rather boring diatribe in which Lady Frowle descanted upon the ill-luck which had pursued her from youth up.

"It is because I was born on a Friday, my dear," she was saying; "and, to make matters worse, Septimus would insist on our being married on the thirteenth of a month. A most stupid defiance of all the accepted laws of——"

"You were married on the thirteenth, Mr. Dant!" laughed Maisie as she and he followed in the wake of the others

"Was I? So I was!" he smiled down at her. "How very unfortunate!"

"Do you really think it will be unfortunate?"

"Do I——? My dear child, how do I know?"

"I wish you wouldn't call me—child, Mr. Dant!" she protested.

"Sorry! I won't any more, young lady!"

The Grand Stand was emptying itself fast of its occupants, and they were carried away now in a flood of well-dressed people making towards the motor-parc, where was assembled what was probably one of the finest collection of automobiles in the world. It was a cool afternoon, and the scene was a very brilliant one. Your French race-course differs considerably in attractiveness, both in surroundings and atmosphere, from your English one, which is—generally speaking—a monstrosity of ugliness and discomfort. Here were lawns and flower-borders and terraces and well-laid paths. Here too was fashion, very chic and daring, gracing much beauty. You observed a greater friendliness and politeness here than you would have experienced even in the most reserved enclosures of an English course.

Most people seemed to know quite well the per-

sonality of James Dant, the English financier. They regarded him with a polite awe. One or two—obviously men connected in one way or another with the Bourse—saluted him with French cordiality and *empressement*.

Maisie, walking by his side, felt herself to be stealing for herself some light from the halo of his greatness.

The Comte de Louvre was driving his own car, which was a low three-seater racer of ugly but powerful build. He seemed, in a veiled way, particularly anxious to settle which of the party would go in his, and which in Dant's. He appeared to take it for granted that he would certainly take June. The question arose as to who should be the third? It was at first suggested that Maisie should go. But, eventually, it was Lady Frowle who was assisted into the back seat.

"I'm glad," said Maisie, as she climbed into the Dant car.

He looked down at her from his corner as they started off. A week's acquaintance with this child had afforded him no little quiet amusement. He did not, of course, know what was quite the correct attitude for James Dant to adopt towards her, there being no more mention of her than her mere name upon that paper of hastily scribbled notes. But he had no doubt that James would chill her

girlish advances exceedingly in his relationship of cousin several times removed. And this echo of James Dant found it difficult to be chilly before such a live young specimen of pretty English girlhood. Child as she might be in years, she was already a woman in mind. He was not blind to that. Her quick wit fascinated him. At times it had alarmed him. Her abrupt method of asking awkward questions which, being what he was, he found it difficult to answer, had more than once disconcerted him. It required no little ingenuity sometimes to draw her inquisitive young mind away from matters that were closely connected with that immediate past of the real James Dant, of which he of course knew nothing.

"I'm glad," she repeated as he did not answer her.

"Why are you glad, child—young lady?" he hastily corrected himself with an apologetic smile.

"Because I didn't have to go in that other car."

"It is a very nice car. I expect it cost a great deal of money."

She regarded him gravely.

"You always think in money, don't you, Mr. Dant?"

"Do I?"

"June says so."

"Does she?"

"Everybody says so."

"Then I suppose it is true."

"I don't think so—quite."

"You don't?"

"No. Because people who only think of money haven't any time to think about other people, have they?"

"Possibly not."

"And you think about other people. You buy chocolates for—me."

"I expect that is because I like you."

"I like you, Mr. Dant."

"That is—very nice of you!"

"But it's only during the last week. Since you married June."

"Indeed! That is very interesting!"

"I got into trouble for saying so to mother this afternoon," she said in her puzzled way of a child troubled over the inconsistencies of her elders. "She said I ought not to say embarrassing things. But I don't see why it was embarrassing! It is quite true. I think you are ever so much nicer now than you were in London. Then—you hardly paid any attention to me at all!"

"That was because I was always so busy, young lady. In London, you know, one doesn't find time for being so nice to people. Just now, I am having a holiday and can spend time in being—a little—

nice. When I get back to London again, I expect I shall be just like I used to be, whatever that was."

Inwardly, he congratulated himself upon this brilliant solution of the problem. He regarded it as an artistic suggestion which made the way clear for the real James Dant when he came back into his own again. Maisie, pondering of her wisdom, was watching the country-side through which the car was tearing at a considerable speed, but not so fast as the Comte's motor which was long since miles ahead of them and out of sight.

"Won't you find time to be nice to June?" she asked suddenly.

"One should always be nice to—one's wife," he said, rather taken aback for the moment, however.

"It wasn't very nice of you to go away from her on your wedding-day, was it, Mr. Dant?"

"Really, my child—my dear young lady——!" he stammered.

"But I suppose you were thinking in money again," she added thoughtfully. "It must be a difficult habit to get out of!"

"Very!" he admitted gruffly.

"Anyhow, you have been very nice to June all this week," she remarked.

"I should like to think so."

"Oh, you have! I heard her say so to mother yesterday."

"One is—usually kind to one's wife," he suggested awkwardly, though chuckling to himself at this child's naïve frankness. "You see, one loves one's wife."

"Do you love June?"

He patted her hand that lay on the seat beside her.

"My dear Maisie, that is what your mother would rightly call a very embarrassing question."

"Why?"

"It is not—usual—to ask—to talk about Love in that—abrupt fashion. People only think about Love. They don't talk about it openly."

"Don't they?" she mused, still watching the country-side with her puzzled young eyes. "No, I suppose they don't. I have never heard father or mother talk about it. Father talks such a lot about politics; so I suppose he hasn't time. And mother has said to me that there isn't such a thing really as Love."

"I expect she was talking in the—abstract sense."

"What is that?"

"Well, you see—Love isn't a thing you can see or measure or anything like that. It is not like chocolates or money——"

"Father's typist girl told me once that money is the greatest enemy Love has."

"A very wise typist girl. If she were my typist girl I would double her salary."

"Why?"

"I expect, poor thing, lack of money is standing between her and Love."

"I must ask her when I get home."

"I shouldn't, if I were you."

"Why not?"

"She mightn't like it. People are usually rather touchy about their money matters."

"Father is. I have heard mother say so. We haven't too much money, you know. Mother was really quite relieved when we met in Paris and you asked us to be your guests till you went back. We should only have had ten days, you know, and I don't expect we should have gone much further than Paris at all. . . ."

(The forethought of James Dant was greatly to be admired!)

"You see how kind you are!" she mused. "You would have doubled our typist girl's money in case she hadn't enough; and you are giving mother and me a perfectly ripping holiday, just when you——"

She regarded dreamily the sleek back of the chauffeur and his neat manipulation of the steering-gear as the car negotiated a particularly tortuous bit of road through a sleepy French hamlet.

“ I always thought people went on honeymoons to get as far away from other people as they could,” she prattled thoughtfully. “ Mother says—it depends. But, if it depended on me, I should want to go ever so far away. Somewhere in a forest with a pool to bathe in, and moss to sleep on, and all that sort of thing. I wouldn’t even mind if there were no sweetie shops—for a while. . . . I shouldn’t want—mother and people about. If I were a man I shouldn’t want other men about—like the Comte de Louvre—— ”

She flashed her bright, interested eyes on her companion in the corner.

“ I don’t like the Comte de Louvre very much,” she announced on a note of definite decision.

“ No ? ”

“ He is a business friend of yours, isn’t he ? ”

“ In a way.”

“ Does he like you very much, Mr. Dant ? ”

“ Upon my word, my dear ! I haven’t the remotest—— ”

“ He likes June. She is so sweetly pretty, isn’t she ? ”

He did not answer. The tangle of this childish cross-examination, leading where the child’s mind intended it to lead, held him motionless and awkwardly tongue-tied.

“ If I were a man I shouldn’t want the Comte

de Louvre about me on my honeymoon anyhow," she said with an almost absurd gravity.

At which moment the car swept through wide-flung gates of massive and ornate design. A long, straight drive between green stretches of wooded park led direct to terraces, above which the sunset flung great splashes of crimson and ochre and purple over the black silhouette of an old-time château, its score of shapely turrets lifted skyward like jagged teeth.

Lights poured from the vast hall which open doors disclosed as the car drew up at the foot of steps.

On the topmost of which stood the Comte, awaiting them.

"How slow you are, Dant!" he laughed with his cat-like purr.

The other regarded him over a whimsical smile.

"Maybe," he said quietly. "But those who go slowest are able to make most use of their eyes."

VII

MUSIC AND CARDS

THE château Louvre was one of the relics of Old France. France of the scented *salons* and a brow-beaten, muttering peasantry. It had still, amid its changed surroundings, the grand air of its zenith. Grand, but subduedly so, defiantly so. One was housed there, as guest, in a semi-state. Dinner was served amid a myriad of candelabra (ancient silver heirlooms introduced to the modern electric wire and bulb), and with the assistance of much liveried flunkeydom.

Watson expressed to June's maid his approval of the chef's handiwork. Indeed, he was of the opinion that things were quite well managed and that the arrangements in the château were to be compared very favourably with those in the best regulated English country houses which had come under his critical eye. He was, in fact, rather sorry than otherwise that the stay at the château was to be a short one only.

He alluded to it, by the way, as the "Tschato." At a very late hour on that night of arrival, after

the good wine had done its work by stimulating his brain and extending the adaptable qualities of his tongue, he alluded to it more than once under the slightly mixed cognomen of "the tatscho."

He was himself in slightly mixed mood, was Watson. An elderly man, he was suffering badly from shock. Shock is always accentuated in its effect on persons of advanced years. It held Watson in a species of mental prostration. It made him feel, as he explained to June's maid, "all wobbly and unnatural-like."

"Four years now I've hassisted Mr. Dant," he observed with that pompous pride of sartorial dictatorship which belongs to the valet of the distinguished man. "Four years, my dear, of what you may call winterin' in the Harctics. Not that I am complainin'. Hon the contrary. Them four years has been, in the manner of speakin', quite agreeable in respect of remuneration and the like. Under such circumstances it is not for a gentleman's gentleman to 'arbour any hanimosity on account of less important inconveniences. And Mr. Dant 'as 'is inconveniences. . . . A 'ard man! A cold man! Harctic is the word, my dear! The frozen eye, all the while! Four years of it, I've 'ad, with never a word of what you might call kindness—as between gentlemen—never a word! Always—strict hattention to dooties and 'this,

Watson,' and 'that, Watson,' and 'yes, sir,' and 'no, sir,' and the like. Not that I'm complainin'. No. Between gentlemen it's only what would be fit and proper, my dear. But—doorin' this last week——!"

In his perturbation he dropped the lounge coat which he had brought out into the corridor to brush, and stooped to pick it up again.

"I feels like that coat," he said. "All dropped sudden like! The change what's come over 'im——! Only I knows it, my dear! And if I didn't know 'im after these four years in and out and about of him—I should say 'e wasn't 'im at all! That good-tempered and soft-like and never 'avin' no complaints ——! It's a bloomin' miracle, my dear; a bloomin' miracle! From that there night in Paris—'e's sort of changed all 'is inside! And the way he speaks—same voice and all—only softer and more moosical! A bloomin' miracle! What done it, I don't know——"

"Love, I expect, Mr. Watson," suggested the maid, her dreamy eyes looking out of the mullioned window to where the terraces lay bathed in a splendid moon. Distant chords of a piano floated along the corridor. She was young and pretty, and cherished wonderful dreams about Love, moons, and music.

"Can't say as I agree, my dear." Mr. Watson

shook his head. "Love isn't for the likes of Mr. Dant. Love's only for the likes of you and me——"

Whereupon the pretty young maid sniffed and regarded Mr. Watson's scanty growth of grey hairs with mild reproof.

"By which my meanin' is"—he added—"that the like of Mr. Dant doesn't take Love into no account when puttin' up the banns for matrimony. It's convenience as counts with the gentry. You and I can't imagine such a one as Mr. Dant—with 'is money and position and all—canoodlin' madame——"

The pretty young maid laughed softly.

"Which doesn't always signify Love," she observed. "Leastways, in my experience——"

Mr. Watson flicked at the coat he held with a disdainful brush.

"There's no knowin' what women wants!" he scoffed. "Maybe, my dear, one o' these days you'll be lookin' back with a feelin' of friendliness to your little bits of canoodlin'. And, any'ow canoodlin' isn't the word to use in connection with gentility. Wifely haffection's the word, which doesn't demean itself with embracin' and such. Maybe, as you say, there is some connection between madame and this bloomin' miracle. Not that I can see 'ow the takin' of a wife can work such a thing as changin' the inside of a man. Especially

such a man as Mr. Dant that would take a wife same as he would a directorship of a company. And it's little enough of each other they see, anyhow, especially 'avin' the Cong de Loovre in tow, so to speak. Which same indicates to me for certain——"

"I thinks it dreadful, Mr. Watson," murmured the pretty young maid, on a note of bruised sentimentality.

"Which it isn't at all!" barked the other. "And when you've been in service to the length of my years, my dear, you'll understand that the *noblesse oblige* of gentlefolk covers a multitude of sins."

He pruned himself over this somewhat ambiguous philosophy, which the pretty young maid affected to treat with a fine scorn.

"If I were married, I wouldn't have another woman trailing round on my honeymoon," she declared with asperity. "My view is that she's all to blame, is madame. It isn't her husband she loves, that's clear to me from all I've seen this week in Paris. But, if she isn't—to my thinking—she 'as no business to be leading on his friend, whom any woman can see at a glance is more than half in love with her, whilst her husband, poor man, is trying to win her affections—as I can see——"

"Dear me!" murmured Mr. Watson, half-

derisive, half-interested. "Dear me, now! And you think that, do you, my dear? Well, maybe! Maybe. . . . However, that bloomin' miracle gets over me. It makes me feel all wobbly and unnatural-like. And, if you're right, it's a bad beginning for a 'onheymoon. Likewise, remembering what one of the waiters at the Superba in Paris told me in regard to the Cong de Loovre—well——!"

Which gentleman's ears should at this moment rightly, according to the old wives' legend, have been burning red and hot. They were, however, of their normal sallow complexion, and agreeably occupied in listening to a little coon song which June was just finishing to her own accompaniment on the piano.

She had an agreeable voice, very sweet if not particularly powerful. It had not contributed greatly to such popularity as she had achieved during the quite short and meteor-like stage career which had been hers. It was rather her beauty and the naïve charm of her stage personality to which she had owed a place among London favourites. These qualities, with some breeding and a not too impossible social standing, would provide almost any girl with a star part at the Colossal, where June had played for a couple of seasons in musical comedy.

The song she was singing had been one of her latest successes. Its catchy rhythm, and her arch rendering of such point as its words contained, were pleasing. The end of it brought a murmur of genuine thanks from the party gathered in the big mirrored *salon*, the walls and furnishings of which had the air of having existed precisely as they now stood, as indeed they had, since Marie Antoinette had graced the château Louvre with her presence, and danced in this same room a stately minuet. They seemed to hold themselves frigidly aloof from the atmosphere of rag-time to which they were now subjected, those mirrored walls and delicately regal furnishings. Without doubt, they had seen many changes.

Out of their great age too might have stepped—saving that unfortunately she was too crippled to step anywhere—the old Comtesse who huddled over the fire in the great hearth at one end of the room. You saw in her white ringlets and lace cap with pearls sewn in it a link between this and that truly great era. Her pose had a very fine stateliness. Those others in the *salon*, including even her grandson, the Comte, were of this new age wherein stateliness is at a discount. Lady Frowle, for instance and despite much watered silk and jewellery, looked anything but stately. There were several French people of rank in the party ; but

they abounded rather in vivacity and a splendid gift of tongues. Their chatter, carried on in furtive whispers, in spasms even during the music, was shrill-voiced and superficial. It touched upon no brain-moving subject, but fluttered lightly over some Paris scandal, some divorce sensation, some story of how a government appointment in the colonies had been sold, of the new Grand Guignol drama, of a new dancer in the semi-nude. . . . The little old Comtesse was in mood for reminiscence to-night. In her delicately high-pitched voice she had been talking of the changes in life and its surroundings her years had brought about. In a sentence she summed it up with the terse lucidity of her century :

“ It was a new world to me when I came into it, Monsieur Dant ; and it will be just as new to me when I leave it.

“ And,” she added, with a little scornful wave of thin hand, “ I believe I shall be quite glad to see the last of it.”

“ We never do that, madame,” he said. “ We come back to it—and its newness—always.”

She looked up sharply at him out of her bright eyes.

“ Ah ! You believe that ? ”

“ Undoubtedly. A soul cannot die. Admitting so much, I do not see how it can possibly be born.

The body that clothes it, yes. That is evolved by natural process, as a bud on a rose tree. But the soul which gives that body power of movement, thought, purpose—that soul must, to my mind, have existed from the beginning of time. It has merely travelled back into the world in a new material shape.”

“ Maybe, maybe ! ” mused the little old Comtesse. “ That is a belief very typical of to-day. It is one of the new things which rather frighten me about this world. It is such a convenient creed. My grand-niece, Marie de Bergerac, is always trying to persuade me to read all sorts of pamphlets about reincarnation. She quite believes in it. She says it saves her worrying so much about Death, and that her sins in this life do not matter so much because she will be given another opportunity quite soon of coming back into the world and living a better life. It is certainly a convenient creed. If I had known enough about it earlier in my time I might have been interested. But I am too old now to have my faith in purgatory shaken. It would be like losing an old friend. But—you and Marie de Bergerac should interest each other immensely, Monsieur Dant. She may be coming over to-morrow from her house which is quite near here, you know. She wrote, saying she might bring a new protégée of hers, whom she says she

has discovered to be—I do not know quite—a reincarnation of Cleopatra, I imagine, or was it Pharaoh's daughter? I know it was somebody rather unusual. It is not a nice idea. I should not like to imagine that I was somebody who was really somebody else. Would you?"

"Well—no!" he murmured awkwardly. He was watching out of his narrowed eyes a redistribution of the guests upon a suggestion that the card-tables should be occupied. June and the Comte were passing from the *salon* into a long gallery that overlooked the terraces and park. He could, from where he sat, see the long stretch of it, with giant oil-paintings on one wall, and a polished floor upon which moonlight streamed through big mullioned windows. The two appeared to him to be interested neither in the pictures nor in the moonlit view from the windows. And his own interest was claimed by the little old Comtesse.

"My grandson has been telling me that you have very kindly placed much of your great financial knowledge to his advantage," she was saying; and, in looking round at her, he saw that her eyes too were upon the couple in the gallery.

"Indeed, Comtesse," he protested, trying to remember the gist of certain pencilled notes on the subject which rested in his pocket. "I think the advantage has been quite mutual. The circum-

stances which originated our friendship——” He paused nervously, being, in truth, only vaguely aware of the exact nature of these.

“ I am quite certain that Raoul owes very much of his present prosperity to you, Monsieur Dant,” she interrupted him, fortunately. “ I hope that he will never forget his obligation.”

“ But there is no obligation,” he assured her laughingly.

“ You have married a very charming woman, monsieur,” she said, as if changing the subject hurriedly.

He bowed.

“ Yourself, you are rather different from what Raoul and—my own experience of wealthy Englishmen had led me to anticipate,” she said.

“ Indeed ? Not unfavourably, I hope.”

“ On the contrary. I think your wife is to be congratulated on her judgment in men.”

“ You flatter me ! ” he laughed.

She shook her silver ringlets.

“ Not at my age, monsieur,” she smiled up at him, adding abruptly, with her slender hand of an aristocrat touching his coat-sleeve gently : “ And now—would you so much mind sending Raoul here to me ? ”

“ With pleasure ! ”

He passed through the *salon*, where the card-

tables were busy, escaping eventually from Lady Frowle, who—with her perpetual “James dear”—was anxious to plan out in detail with him the arrangements for the projected trip to Switzerland. She was one of those dissatisfied women who either live in the future or the past and show no appreciation for the present.

For himself, he could not understand why, if he must burden himself with an escort on his honeymoon, James Dant had not selected someone more entertaining.

He met June and the Comte just as they appeared to be retracing their steps from the gallery back to the *salon*. He came upon them, too, rather suddenly. The Comte was talking very earnestly into her ear in that smooth, musical voice of his which seemed created for passionate confidences.

At the sight of his guest, he broke off suddenly with a light laugh, which might, or might not, have had something of vexation in it, according to how you read it.

“Ah—Dant!” he exclaimed, as though here was just the very person he most desired to see. “I have been trying to persuade Mrs. Dant to enjoy a little horse-exercise in the morning. With this spell of fine weather, the fresh air would do her a world of good. Much more good than motoring! What do you think?”

“Excellent ! I quite agree with you. And what does she say ? ”

“ I should like it,” said June simply. The persuasion appeared to have been effective.

“ Then it is settled ! ” enthused the Comte. “ I will send orders to the stables, where there are plenty of animals eating their heads off. We will make up a party. But—you, my dear Dant ! I had forgotten that—let me see !—you do not ride, I think ? ”

With the words, it flashed through the mind of the other that James Dant was the most miserable fellow on horseback in the world.

“ Hate it ! ” he said instinctively. “ But—what do I matter ? You can make up a party without me.”

“ What a pity ! ” mused the Comte. “ Still, of course, if you don’t mind, Dant——”

“ Mind ? My dear fellow—— ! ”

With which he remembered the message upon which he had come.

“ By the way, de Louvre. The Comtesse asked me to find you. She wanted you to go to her. I am afraid, after the time I have taken to find you, her patience with me will be——”

“ She sees me already ! ” said the Comte, standing in the doorway of the *salon*. “ I expect she is ready to be wheeled off to bed. These old ones—they become nuisances ! ”

He said it, as he went off, with his expressive eyes not on the old lady by the fire but on the vivid grey patch of hair over the right temple of the man at his side. And, covertly, he spoke to June.

The cards were spread out on the tables. Amid laughter, losses and gains were being pencilled down.



VIII

ABSALOM AMONG THE TREES

WATSON was of the opinion, still more than ever, that Mr. James Dant was not quite himself.

“ Gets up o’ mornin’s so merry and bright ! ” he observed to the pretty young maid who came out of June’s bedroom. “ Never ’ave I known the like in all these four year. There ain’t no Love attached to that ! Love keeps one abed—thinkin’. No. It’s a doctor he’s needin’. Nervous breakdown and can’t sleep ! It frightens me ! ”

It was, at any rate, a morning upon which to rise early and feel merry and bright. One of those mornings between late autumn and early winter when the air is fresh and keen and, with a dash of the sun’s brightness, superbly exhilarating.

The temporary Mr. James Dant felt the glow of youth in his veins. Coffee and a hot roll had stiffened his loins to a good, sharp walk across the park. A good cigar was company to his thoughts ; and the Paris edition of an English paper was in his pocket in case these failed him. Seemingly, they had for the moment, since he unfolded it as

he walked, and scanned its news-columns with an indifferent eye. They evidently contained nothing exciting, for he turned over a page with a shrug of the shoulders and, studying this casually, was on the point of pushing the printed sheets back into his pocket when something, hitherto unnoticed, caught his attention.

He flattened out the paper and stared eagerly at the headlines which had drawn his eye. They were over the smaller type announcement "By Our City Editor."

"SENSATIONAL SLUMP IN OIL

MYSTERY OF TRANS-ATLANTIC UNLOADINGS

PANIC ON THROGMORTON STREET

MORE IN THE BACKGROUND"

Remarkable scenes, the letter-press stated, were witnessed on 'Change at the disclosure of wholesale unloadings of oil-shares in New York during the last twenty-four hours. It was at present impossible to locate the origin of the slump which, it appeared, had exhibited itself at a critical moment for London brokers. Private cables had served to increase the prevailing anxiety; and there was general fear of heavy losses. Point was added to the mystery by indications that the market was being cleverly rigged, certain other

prices show a nervous tendency. Opinion generally in Throgmorton Street/ hinted at still further intense fluctuations as possible, if not certain, immediately. The market closed on little or no business at night, and it was felt that anything might happen with its reopening after the weekend. It was strongly suggested in several usually well-informed quarters that the sensation owed its existence to an adroit move by some financial Napoleon, who had still several cards up his sleeve.

The temporary Mr. James Dant pushed the paper back into his pocket with a soft little laugh of amusement. Somewhere in New York, the real James Dant was hard at work pulling the strings of profit! So far then the ingenious plot was working very well. Almost, carried away for the moment by the thought of the rush and tear of it all and the keen battle of wits that lay behind it, he found himself half wishing he were back again in the vortex of that whirlpool of Mammon worshippers, in that temple filled with roaring, shouting bulls and bears. But the sun was on the trees, and the air was sweet with the scents of Nature. And, after all, his work lay here. Now he had set out upon it and accomplished already a third of it, not hard work at all. Nor unpleasant, at least so far. At any rate, he was getting along with it well and safely. He had indeed never felt safer than

this morning. So far he had parried and thrust aside each and all of the numerous pin-pricks which had threatened, with almost every hour since he had left the rue Paradise, to let daylight into the thin Quixotic armour of his impersonation. During that period he had suffered many moments of lively nervousness. But these had lessened in frequency and intensity with every day, as he rose more and more surely to his rôle, which he had played with an ever-increasing confidence until now—he cared not a fig for the chances of discovery. And, in the meantime, from a word dropped here and there by this one and that one, he had learned a thousand and one little interesting details of the life and habits of James Dant that helped him on his way in his character of life-like understudy. So that this morning he faced the future with a brazen callousness. Never, he thought, had so mad an enterprise been conceived by mind of man and carried out with so impudent an optimism! But the results had only served to show how possible the apparently impossible could be made. It emphasised how really blind are the eyes, and how blunted the brains of humanity in general.

Now that the game was well and surely afoot he was not sorry he had come into it. Once or twice, when alone with his thoughts, he had fallen to looking at his hands for the stains of the unclean which

he felt must be there. But this, of course, was mere sentimental nonsense. All the elements which might have made for uncleanness were missing from this adventure. There was no moral wrong in bluffing these people, if they were foolish enough to be bluffed. Such chance of moral wrong existing—as he had at first felt to be possible on the night he had, from sheer mood of devilry, accepted the mission—had vanished under what June had told him a few hours later. If she had loved her husband, or he her, it would have been an entirely different matter. Existing coldness in marital relationships completely absolved him.

As a matter of fact, he thought as little and seldom of June as was possible. For no particular reason that he could have defined. He felt sorry for her. He was intensely angry with his brother for the spirit in which he had married her. He was afraid to think what their future must be when that gentleman returned from his secret trip to New York and claimed once more his own personality and its responsibilities. Meanwhile—though on this bright sunny morning his understudy was out to enjoy to its full the pleasant life which chance had thrown his way, and the freakish whimsicality of what he had called a devil of a mood had tempted him to seize upon—he looked forward keenly to the hour of his release, when he

could go back to that life of obscurity and hapless indifference in the rue Paradise which was temperamentally his el Dorado. In the rue Paradise one was not troubled with qualms of conscience, however necessary. One had no responsibilities, few cares.

It was evident that responsibilities were not to be missing from this adventure on which he had embarked. There was always the responsibility that he filled his part effectively. That, however, was a responsibility which he was shouldering in kindly mood, because it had in it that element of sport, love of which flourished strongly in his loose-welded character. But there was also, it seemed, an exceeding responsibility attaching to June, which he recognised as threatening increasingly the even course of life. The responsibility of June and the attitude which his host, the Comte de Louvre, was adopting towards her.

He knew only vaguely the relationship in which James Dant and the Comte stood to each other. Money made its links, he had gathered. Also, from hints which the Comte had dropped in his insolently familiar way which yet was nothing you might directly quarrel with, he had gleaned that it had been James Dant's expressed wish that the former and his wife should be good friends. No doubt the financier had anticipated the convenience

of a trusted escort for the wife of a busy man. Perhaps, Love not having entered into the matter at all, he was oblivious to any possibility of future complications under such an arrangement.

That complications were already under way, his understudy could permit of no doubt. The thing ought to be clear to the most indifferent. The young eyes of little Maisie, recognising it, had set her tongue wagging on a childish note of warning. That little old Comtesse, albeit her eyes were dim, had seen evidence sufficing for shrewdly veiled warning too. She was anxious that her grandson should not forget his obligations. . . .

It was a complication which, one might be quite certain, the real James Dant had not foreseen. It was also a complication with which, after all, he alone could properly deal. All that his understudy could do, during his absence, was to keep its development within bounds without appearing to have noticed its existence.

The situation required delicate handling. Since that night in the hotel Superbe, June and he had scarcely exchanged half a dozen sentences without the protecting presence of a third person. Yet nobody would have imagined anything but that they were on most excellent terms with each other. What feelings she had for the man whose name she bore were masked effectively behind her beauty

and charm of manner. He, on his part, had reciprocated with alacrity her evident desire for company other than his, wherever possible. Without inviting attention to it, he had very ably and subtly contrived the gratification of her unexpressed wish, though—in his rôle of the pompous, cut-and-dried millionaire husband—he had been always at hand and ready with lavish purse to meet her slightest whim. In fact, he had been flattering himself privately that James Dant could not have played his own part any better.

But all the time he had acted only half-heartedly. An unwilling mummer forced to a rôle he loathed. Himself, he had a very tender heart for all women. Whatever the foolishness and excesses of his early days, he had committed none of them against women. Indeed, it was mainly through his simple-minded good nature towards women that he had fallen from the grace of Mammon, been expelled from 'Change, and eventuated in the oblivion of exile. Yet those years of self-effacement and aimless wanderings over more than one part of the world had found him still cherishing unbroken that tender, chivalrous regard for women. It had perhaps saved him from sinking as deep as circumstances and his inherent indifference to the future had often tempted him. Who knows?

At least, he was neither wreckage nor garbage

of humanity when his brother found him in the rue Paradis. He was only a devil-may-care fellow who was philosophically and quite lightheartedly considering the most pleasant way to liquidate the heavy drawings he had made upon the bank of Life. And, though he had not admitted it even to himself, perhaps it was the same tender, chivalrous regard for woman which had tempted him to delay that liquidation, time another to see through this quixotic adventure which his brother had thrust upon him. Again, who knows?

Certainly he had embarked upon it with a strong sympathy for the young life which had that day been linked with his brother's. And that sympathy, after the first night in the *Superbe*, had grown into a deeper feeling. Not a feeling to be analysed and set down in cold words. It defied description. But it made him come near to hating his brother. Which was a curious thing for him, who had never hated anybody in his life.

And, this morning when the sunshine was on the trees and the air was like wine with the scent of pines strong in it, he was in mood to behave abruptly and in not too kindly a fashion with this Comte de Louvre, who was out somewhere in the wooded country-side with June, and needing sorely to be taught how to keep his hands from picking and stealing. . . .

He had heard them ride away, a clatter of hoofs on the terrace. He had sprung out of bed, and looked down through the diamond-paned windows at their cavalcade. A party of six, agreeably paired. The Comte, very spruce and booted and spurred, riding last with June, very pretty and smiling and with the copper and gold of her hair contrasting vividly against her dark green riding habits.

This affair would need delicate treatment. It was young. One could see that. It had all the fierceness of reality on the Comte's side at least. One could see that also. Further one could understand her side of it. He had that air of the ready-made lady-killer about him which few women can resist. Paris had added to that air, by the way, the whisper of a ready-made reputation. One hears of such things even in the rue Paradise. Here, it matters not how.

It could be no easy position for June. It would be no easy position for any woman. All women are in love with Love. He is breath of their nostrils, that little god. Come he by way of the altar—why, so much the better ! But, by any way—so he come. And, if he come craving, too late ? It is never too late for a woman to love Love. But, if he come when she has already—shall we say—sold herself ? Why, then—there is pain for the woman ; and, if she be all true woman, much prosecution and no

defence in a dusty divorce court. Barter is an unholy thing. Christ threw it out of the temple neck and crop. But we still use His house for the barter of souls. So long we do, there shall always be dusty divorce courts ; even as there be hospitals for the sick, and waste-paper baskets for dishonoured cheques.

But, of course, it was quite premature to think of divorce courts in connection with this affair. It was certain that the great Mr. James Dant, financier and millionaire, would proceed to considerable lengths before he would allow that to happen to sully the name he had made famous. He deserved well that it should be so sullied, who had bought his dove and caged it in the house of God. Though one does not get in this world everything that one deserves. Which one might think to be an injustice, only that one does not take into reckoning the balance which will be demanded by the Recording Angel in that other place where a receipt for payment in full is drawn out and waiting.

Meanwhile, Mr. James Dant was in New York, attending to the making of money, very effectively ; and his wife, somewhere in these woods, was no doubt attending, with equally potent effect, to the making of Love.

To which certain conclusion her husband's understudy had come at a moment when, at a parting in

the wood, he stepped from a shrubbery-hedged path on to a little grass plateau from which, the ground descending in a gentle slant, he looked out for a long distance over a stretch of beautiful country.

At once, he came to a sudden standstill. Almost within a stone's throw below him two figures moved on horseback slowly along the chalk road that was a white, winding ribbon in a green glade. Copper and gold, the hair of the woman gleamed in the sunlight. The man leaned across from his saddle towards her, one of his hands upon her rein-hand, the other upon the flank of her horse.

There was no doubt that the Comte must be taught to keep his hand from picking and stealing. At the moment it was stealing with her rein-hand to meet his bowed lips.

The temporary Mr. James Dant began to make a detour through the trees, keeping for some inexplicable reason out of sight of the couple, whose horses—seemingly aware that their riders were preoccupied—were rubbing noses in an improvised species of imitation and, incidentally, dawdling shamelessly over the occupation.

The detour would bring him, at that rate, first to the point where the ribbon of road, in its gentle ascent, reached the trees. Making it, he caught a sight of the four others who had made up the party, cantering on another road in the direction of the

château. There was a rise in the ground between them and the glade, and they could not see the others. They were, anyhow, looking up in the sky and pointing eagerly over the trees where he stood. It seemed to him that, behind him through the wood, he heard the hum of a motor. He glanced idly to the left where the road showed as yet no sign of any car, though the roar of the engine seemed to be near at hand. The fact rather surprised him in a half-hearted way, though his mind was really with the couple on their slow-moving horses which by now were advancing up the curved slant towards where he stood among the bushes. They evidently had not noticed him, being engrossed in their talk. June's head was bowed very low. He could see, from a gesture of her hand, that she was negating or trying to delay something the Comte was saying. He was leaning dangerously sideways, expostulating in his French way with an immaculately gloved hand.

It was at this moment that the sound of a motor, which had been for an instant stilled, rattled out close at hand with the noise of a machine gun, spitting and spluttering and setting the horses jumping and curveting.

And, skimming the tree-tops with a sudden rush, a monoplane blotted out the sun in a fierce swoop across the glade. . . .

What happened passed, in a flash, with the shadow cast by the aeroplane as it soared by. One instant—the temporary Mr. James Dant shouted warningly. The next instant he had leaped forward as though flung from a catapult. He sprang right, so' it seemed, at the throat of the riderless horse that was dashing towards him. He appeared suddenly astride its saddle as if he had been there all the while. And, simultaneously, its mad pace slackened for an instant. It shivered and darted off at a tangent right back along that white ribbon of road by which it had dawdled here. On its way, it leaped the inert figure of its master, stretched out face downwards in the dust. The man on its back leaned well over its neck, shouting hoarse, wild words of French into his ear, urging it on in the name of God, for the sake of the Mother of God, for all the saints, for the Devil himself—if he was the only power that would transform its gallop into a miracle.

For, far ahead on the road, low-bellied against the dust, raced the other horse. And on the back of it swayed and crouched the girl's slender green-habited form, hat gone and copper-gold hair all astream in the wind. . . .

The road curved on round to the left always, clear and good and without visible danger. But every curve had with it a hidden dread of something

in the beyond, some catastrophe. . . . He felt, and knew, presently that he was gaining. To gain more, in despair, he attempted a forlorn hope. To the left still was a field with a stream across it. How wide the stream, he did not know or care. Once over it, he should easily rejoin the road fast at the heels of the runaway. The dangerously swaying girl might fall now at any moment. . . . His horse cleared the ditch at the side of the road in a slanting leap. It was a rough field of grass, full of holes and ups and downs. But it was neck or nothing. Once, twice, the animal under him stumbled, righted itself, jerked in frenzy at the cruel bit, and plunged helplessly on. . . . He was on the bank of the stream almost before he realised it. It was no mean jump, and he knew that the horse shirked it. Despair in him boiled to a white rage. He flung out oaths of a strange calibre and thick as rain. His hand sought blindly the creature's foam-flecked flank, and seemed to dig into it. With a jerky little scream of fear, the horse leaped madly, all hunched and quivering. . . .

Its forefeet touched the other bank. The others, water-drenched and madly struggling, followed. . . .

The road was rejoined just as the other horse flew past. Afterwards, for untold minutes, they were heel to neck. Presently, drew with every clatter of hoofs more like neck and neck. . . . The

girl's white face, the eyes closed, turned slowly round. Though she was only half-conscious and hanging on with the automatic grimness which seemed to defy the imminence of Death, she appeared suddenly to understand that help might reach her.

Knee to knee with her, he flung out an arm round her waist.

"Loose your feet from your stirrups!" he yelled in her ear, praying inwardly she might have sense and strength to help in her saving. He yelled his order twice, because the roar of hoofs under them was deafening. Then:

"Good!" he laughed breathlessly. The girl had been swung across his saddle, and his hands were busy, under and over her limp body which they kept from falling, with a sawing movement of his rein which, after a while, brought his panting animal to an abrupt halt. The other horse was still heading its mad rush along the white road. . . .

Its arrival, riderless, at the de Louvre stables had prepared the household for an accident. White-faced flunkeys and stable-hands, running, were amazed to see who rode the Comte's stallion with the unconscious girlish figure in his arms.

"But M'sieur le Comte——?" they gasped.

He indicated to them the direction and circum-

stances of the case, in his French which, even at this moment of excitement and strain, he remembered not to make more fluent than would have come easily over the tongue of the real Mr. James Dant.

The two men, who had been of the riding party that morning, here rode up at a sharp canter, surprised and perplexed. They realised that the aeroplane must have caused a fright to the horses, stable animals not as yet having learnt to appreciate the harmlessness of the world's newest science. But de Louvre—unhorsed! The thing seemed impossible to them. He was so fine a figure on a horse!

However, they galloped, and were followed afoot by the flunkeys, across country towards the scene of the accident.

It was half an hour later that the Comte was brought in. He was suffering badly from shock, and his collar-bone was badly dislocated. It was nothing to make a fuss about. He must go slowly for a day or two, carrying his arm in a sling, be interestingly invalided.

He did not seem quite able to explain how he came to have so insecure a seat in his saddle as to have been easily thrown off. Allusion to it annoyed him. He said the whole stupid business puzzled him.

But, inwardly, what puzzled him most was how on earth James Dant, who—to his certain knowledge—was scarcely to be persuaded upon a horse's back and then was the most miserable of amateur riders, could possibly have done what they told him he had. It was a feat worthy of envy by men born to the saddle.

The Comte could not understand it. It puzzled him exceedingly.

And to this problem was added, of a sudden, a train of thought which ran, afire in a vivid streak, straight to the powder magazine of his conscience.

What had brought James Dant to that spot at that particular moment? Had he been there long? How long? Long enough to see—watch—suspect. . . .

The Comte hung between fear and defiance, as maybe did Absalom, his mule gone from under him, and himself held hanging among the trees by the hair of his head.

IX

WITH VELVET GLOVES

WHICH probably accounted for the fact that when later his guest came to enquire after his progress the Comte was discreetly vague about the whole incident, merely permitting himself effusive hopes that June was really none the worse for her adventure.

"They say she is doing well, Dant?" he said anxiously.

"Splendidly! Suffering a little from shock, of course!" was the answer. "But, after a little rest, she will be quite all right."

"Thank Heaven!"

"Yes. It was a lucky escape."

"She must have had wonderful pluck to hang on——"

"Wonderful!"

"I should have regarded myself as seriously to blame if any harm had come to her——"

"Nonsense. That wretched air machine frightened the wits out of the horses. You couldn't be blamed for that, could you? Besides, with a damaged collar-bone——"

"A confounded nuisance, which is just bad enough to prevent me from fulfilling my duties as host as well as I should like!"

"My dear fellow——! That need not lie heavily on your conscience, anyhow! We must be going on to-morrow, you know."

"But—you'll hang on for a day or two—till this beastly neck of mine mends a bit? The arrangement that I should go with you——"

"Was that an—arrangement?"

"Why, of course!"

"I suppose I must have forgotten. Let me see——"

The Comte looked up at him in a sharp, puzzled way.

"You suggested it yourself, in case you had an emergency call from London, so that the ladies might not have to travel back alone——"

"Ah, yes! But, at any rate, I don't for a moment anticipate that will happen——"

"No? I expect you haven't—but, of course, you wouldn't have missed seeing this morning's papers, Dant!" exclaimed the other, turning over with excited fingers one he had open on the table by his couch.

"I saw it."

"Then—what about this stampede in London? Won't it upset your arrangements at all?"

“ Not at all. Why should it ? ”

“ But you were a heavy holder in oil ? ”

“ Maybe.”

“ You don't think you'll have to hurry back to London—presently ? ”

“ Not till I am due to go back.”

“ Hm ! ”

After a moment the Comte said :

“ It's the first time I've known you out of town at a time when the market was in a panic—— ”

“ It being also the first time I happen to have been on a honeymoon, de Louvre.”

There was something subtly deliberate in the tone, something that, whether meant to or not, made the sentence bite into the mind. The Comte looked up again in that sharp, puzzled way. The other had spoken with his back to the room. He was looking idly through the window across the park.

“ Why, of course ! ” laughed the Comte with a slightly forced hilarity. “ What need to remind me of that, Dant ? ”

“ You seem to have overlooked it, my dear fellow.”

At which moment a fussy little French doctor dashed into the room upon the announcement of his name by the Comte's sleek valet.

The doctor had an irrepressible tongue and a

loud, high-pitched voice. In the turmoil which these brought into the quiet room, the temporary Mr. James Dant escaped.

A metallic roll of thunder muttering somewhere at the foot of the great circular sweep of stairway indicated the approach of the luncheon hour.

He turned down a broad landing where were his rooms and those of June, whose maid met him half-way along it.

“Madame would be obliged, sir, if you would
——”

She held open a door invitingly.

“Thanks,” he said, and stepped inside.

It was the first time he had been in her room. She was out of bed, and sitting by a fire. Luncheon things were spread ready upon a table by her chair, a glitter of silver and glass upon white cloth.

He looked at them rather than at her. Indeed, he was curiously afraid to look at her. He knew that she was in *deshabille* of some sort, and that her copper-gold hair was loose and unbound over her shoulders. These things, vaguely realised, gave him a sense of standing upon sacred ground. He wished the maid had not vanished so abruptly, closing the door behind her with a sharp noise that only served to increase his embarrassment.

“I am glad you are—all right,” he said, rather stupidly.

"I suppose it would be the proper thing for me to—thank you," she murmured.

"I don't see why!" he laughed awkwardly.

"You saved my life, of course."

"I doubt it," he contradicted. "The chances were all in favour of you saving your own. You hung on so pluckily that, if I hadn't interfered——"

"I was just falling—when you—reached me," she asserted.

"Were you? It was like my proverbial luck just to reach you——"

"I thought you hated riding?" she interrupted on a sharp note of curiosity. "The Comte de Louvre was telling me that you—could not sit in the saddle?"

He watched her hands fumbling with silver on the table.

"So I may have told him," he said drily.

She looked up at him quickly out of frightened eyes, which, however, were turned swiftly in the direction of the fire as they encountered his grave ones.

"I rather wanted to speak to you—alone," she said abruptly. "Downstairs we——"

The silver with which she had been toying fell with a clatter upon the table.

"Our position is rather unusual," she said in a strained way.

“Is it?” In a moment he had become the unwilling mummer forced to the rôle he loathed. The stern stand-offish air of James Dant, millionaire husband, had settled itself upon his shoulders instantly as though he had suddenly cloaked himself. But, beneath it, the heart that beat in tender regard for women was heavy at the part he must play.

He was more than ever afraid to look at her. The beauty of her, and the dainty intimacy of the loose silk and lace things she wore affecting him intensely. He never remembered having been affected in that way by any woman before.

“I mean——” she murmured, with a helpless little gesture of her hands. “We are not troubled much with our own company, are we?”

“That,” he suggested coldly, “I rather imagined was precisely what would have afforded you most pleasure. But, if you wanted to tell me that I am neglecting you——”

“No,” she interrupted. “Nobody could quite say that. I think—the only thing that has really worried me has been that—you have been almost too kind. Certainly, kind in a way one would not have expected from a man who married a girl for the reason that you——”

“Need we go into all that?” he questioned sharply.

"No—no!" she whispered. "It was all gone into and settled. Only, the bargain we made——"

"Pardon me. The bargain—you—made," he corrected her. "If you will take the trouble to recollect, you made your own proposition, giving me no opportunity either to take or to leave it. Not that that makes any great difference. For the time being, at any rate, I accepted your—proposition. And I am sorry if you have any complaint to make as to my interpretation of the best way to give effect to it?"

"On the contrary, I am very grateful." She spoke with restrained emotion, looking into the fire and with her face screened from him by a little hand that trembled nervously. "I wanted to tell you so, to thank you. I—I was afraid you might take it so differently. Instead, you have made everything easy and—pleasant for me. I have wanted to thank you—several times. But—we have scarcely been alone together for more than a second or two at a time. And now—after this morning—I have still more to thank you for. I owe you my life. Oh, yes! Why deny it? You may wish to, but I cannot, however much I might wish the same. It rather—galls. I would sooner have died than have owed you this fresh debt——"

He interrupted her emotional outburst with a cold gesture.

"Must we be always talking of debts?" he frowned irritably, and stalked to the window where he stood tapping the glass with impatient fingers. "I am on holiday now, and in no mood for business."

She laughed with soft irony.

"Yet, when I sent Mercer for you an hour ago, they told me you were busy talking on the telephone with London?" she said.

"Quite right," he retorted, without looking round at her. "The office rang me up. There is some trouble on—the market, and they have been getting in a panic. I have told them to get out of it as best they can without me."

She looked up at his broad back with something of surprise.

"That is very—unlike you, isn't it?" she said. "I mean—if you would rather we went back to town, please do not consider me."

"I do not propose to go back to town."

"And—they will get out of their—panic?"

"I pay them good salaries in view of—just such emergencies."

"Besides," he added in the pause that followed, "I am on my honeymoon."

"A mere—formality," he heard her say with breathless furtiveness; and turned round upon her gravely.

"How could it be anything else between—you and me?" he questioned sharply.

"Of course not," she said, evading his eyes.

"Only——"

"Only?"

"Nothing much—except that—I shall not be sorry when it is over."

"Are you not enjoying yourself?"

"Oh, yes."

"And to-morrow we are all going on to Switzerland. Only yesterday I heard you and Lady Frowle discussing the Swiss trip with keen interest."

"I have always wanted to see Switzerland," she said, as if in excuse.

"Then——?"

"Yet I would sooner we went straight back to town," she said doggedly, "if it were possible."

He stared at her for a moment in surprise, to which was added a flicker of alarm as he realised her note of seriousness. For her suggestion, amounting in fact to a veiled request, was entirely out of the question. The Swiss visit was essential because, in Lucerne a week from to-day, he must enquire at the poste restante if there was any letter or telegram for a Mr. James. And there would be handed him a cable, he hoped, containing the name of a French liner—the liner on which the real Mr. James

Dant would return across the Atlantic. So that, even if she begged of him, the Swiss visit could not be cut out.

"I am afraid your suggestion is not—at all possible," he said. "My arrangements have all been made——"

"Very well!" she murmured with a little gesture of resignation, and then leaned suddenly forward.

"Only, I should like to say this," she added. "I can never forget what—happened this morning. Whether I like it or not, it makes some difference to the way I—think of you. It wasn't at all the kind of thing I expected of you. Like—your treatment of me during the last week—it puzzles me. I am rather thrown off my balance. That is my excuse for saying what I want to say. And that amounts to this. You did not marry me for love of me, nor I—you. It was a business transaction, in which we are partners. I think marriage is not one of those businesses which can afford a—sleeping partner——"

And here the door was opened after a timid knock that rang through the silent room, and the maid appeared with luncheon dishes on a tray.

"By the way," said June with a careless interest, as though bored of a previous topic, "will the Comte be well enough to travel with us to Switzer-

land to-morrow? He is coming with us, is he not? "

"No," said the other, looking out through the window and making slowly for the door. "No. He is not, after all, going with us."

X

WINDOWS OF THE WORLD

MEANWHILE the Comte had no intention of permitting his damaged collar-bone to confine him even for to-day entirely to his room.

Rather pale, and interestingly bandaged, he put in an appearance at afternoon tea which, the weather being more than ordinarily warm and sunny for the time of year, was served just outside the drawing-room windows on the Italian terrace.

That wholly delightful spot constituted one of the most noted charms of the château Louvre, with its slender pillars and pergolas which, of summer time, were ablaze with the most beautiful of roses. It looked down, this terrace, from a great height—a sheer drop of many feet of granite wall—upon fruit orchards, and over a vast expanse of one of the most beautiful of French country-sides. This afternoon, what it lacked in blaze of blooms and scent of flowers, it boasted in beauty of women and daintiness of toilettes, in perfumes none the less exotic because not altogether of Nature's providing. The tables on the black and white marble paving

were crowded with a very fine company. The old Comtesse and the three unmarried sisters of the Comte entertained largely. Two of the unmarried sisters, it may be mentioned, were by now well on the way towards wearing the bridal veil and orange blossoms. It was hoped that quite soon the third might be expected to show signs of equal interest in life. Such affairs take long to arrange in France when the *dot* is not of exciting value. And, for all their grand style, they were not rich, these de Louvres. But they were particular still.

It was said that it nearly broke the heart of the old Comtesse that her grandson should have had to resort to the Bourse—even though in his delicate manner and with gloved hands—to bolster up the fortunes of their unfortunate house. Still, as she had to admit, money was necessary to life. And nearly everybody (worth calling everybody) in France was doing much the same thing. So she permitted herself to entertain on broad lines which would be helpful. The monied and the blooded met at her board. And, as things are nowadays in the matter of pretty plumage, it was really rather difficult to tell the one from the other. Her guests had all the sparkle and bouquet of fine vintage.

For the main part they were people who had motored over for tea, and in some cases dinner,

from big houses in the neighbourhood. A large assemblage of automobiles on the lowest terrace gave evidence as to their numbers and luxurious standard of living. One or two new arrivals were indicated in the dust clouds that hung over the long, straight drive from the distant gates.

The little old Comtesse, in her invalid chair, had just sent for her grandson, who was being felicitated upon his fortunate escape of the morning, sympathised with by the women over its physical effect upon himself, and severely cross-examined by the men as to the details of its occurrence.

He was in none too amiable mood, it was clear, this monsieur le Comte. Affable enough on the surface, but a bit inclined to be brusque, and certainly unusually loth of words. The message from the old Comtesse visibly annoyed him. To tell the truth, she rather bored him, his old grandmother. It is the destiny of the old to be regarded with boredom by the young in these days of grace.

He was not more pleased when, working his way towards her invalid chair through the crush, he found her in the company of Mr. James Dant. To a close observer, it would have been evident that, covertly, the two men regarded each other coldly.

"How is it that Marie de Bergerac is not yet arrived, Raoul?" she enquired. "I hope she is coming. I do so want her to meet Monsieur Dant. Would you telephone and find out if she has left? Or give orders to Louis——?"

"But you know what Marie is, grandmère!" laughed the Comte indifferently. "Always the last to arrive and the last to go! And not too certain of coming at all, or going at all! Though—by the way—she is staying for dinner, is she not? Oh, well! She will come in time for dinner! Marie never misses one of our dinners! And, if she did for once, it would be the better for Monsieur Dant. He would miss an insufferable bore——"

"How can you say such a thing, Raoul?"

"My estimable cousin is something of a crank, Dant," explained the Comte, offering his cigarette-case to the other. "She would bore you to tears. Of course she would, grandmère! Her absurd twaddle about reincarnation——"

"Monsieur Dant is quite interested, as a matter of fact. He has really been giving me some most interesting arguments in favour of it——"

The Comte stared in blank amazement, a smile of cynicism on his thin lips.

"Dant arguing about reincarnation——?"

The other was lighting his cigarette.

"You did not know that I was beginning to take

quite an interest in my soul, de Louvre ? ” he asked laughingly, as if understanding instinctively that some explanation was necessary.

“ I did not. It is about the last thing in the world I should have expected a practical man like you—— ”

“ Monsieur Dant,” interspersed the little old Comtesse, “ is far more practical about it than is Marie, my dear Raoul. He has really almost converted me.”

The Comte threw out his unslung hand in a gesture eloquent of comic despair.

“ I will go and telephone before he tries to convert me, grandmère ! ” he laughed drily over his shoulder as he passed into the house.

“ It is very curious—very curious ! ” he mumbled to himself as he made his way through the drawing-room.

“ It is very curious—very curious ! ” he repeated to himself, crossing the great hall where liveried servants stood like statues as he passed.

“ I’ll be damned if it isn’t the most curious thing in the world ! ” he exclaimed petulantly, banging the door after him as he strode into his own room. And, sitting down at the broad, low writing-table upon which a telephone stood, he stared for a moment out of puzzled eyes at the litter of papers upon it.

“There’s something in it ! There must be ! He tried to take up riding in London because it was—the fashion. And—damn it—he was the funniest sight in the world ! It seems uncanny—that this morning—— ! And now—souls——”

He talked, apparently quite unwittingly, in a loud voice, banging the table with his uninjured fist like a prosecuting advocate stating his case against a prisoner.

“There’s a queer change in him—all this last week. Yes, it counts from his marriage. Not before. Funny ! Not a pronounced change. Something gradual and—the kind of thing you can’t explain. I’ll be damned if I could explain it ! Can’t get him to talk money, for instance ! Extraordinary—for him ! It’s—it looks as if he’s deeper than I thought. He’s got me, worse luck, right in his hands. Of course, he’s deep. But not deeper than I. Unless——”

He broke off and looked furtively round the room, afterwards catching up the receiver with a swift nervous movement, calling a number into the instrument with his soft purr, which he always used when answering a woman.

“Yes, *ma chère*. You have it.”

And, presently :

“The château Bergerac ? Good ! This is the Comte de Louvre. . . . Madame la Baronne is in ?

... Gone? ... Just gone? ... Good. ... Thank you."

He pushed the receiver back into its place, still staring in deep thought at the litter of papers on the table.

"It might be devilish awkward," he mumbled after a moment. "Devilish awkward if, all the time, he was playing deeper than——"

His unslung arm was stretched out towards a drawer, which a key in his hand unlocked. He brought papers from it, and laid them before him, groping a one-handed way through them.

The one he took out and read with cunning-lit eyes was written in French under an address in the city of London. It was undersigned by a name which was scratched in the cramped handwriting common to that nation which broods on the eastern bank of the Rhine. The letter was short and the more eloquent for what it did not contain in so many words.

"MY DEAR COMTE,—

"Thanks for information. I have credited your account in Paris with the reward of your kind interest. I am glad that you are likely to be with our friend during his holiday on the Continent. You will be able to indicate to me any further projects he may have in hand. And,

meantime, it will be to your advantage to keep him there as long as possible. Big business is in hand, in which I should like you to share with me some of the profits.

“BERGENPLATZ.”

The Comte dropped the letter from between his fingers suddenly as a clock on a mantel boomed heavily the single note of a half-hour. He looked around him with the sharp nervousness of intense fear, and hurriedly assembled the pile of papers, pushing them back furtively into the drawer from which he had taken them, locking it afresh and rising to his feet abruptly.

One hand went swiftly to his neck, as though a stab of pain needed sudden soothing. In body and mind he was evidently ill at ease. Towards some windows that led into a conservatory he walked painfully.

“I wonder if he has suspected at all?” he mumbled to himself as he opened the window and stepped through into the close, flower-scented atmosphere, and passed a hand over his hot, pallid forehead. “This new move about my not going to Switzerland. . . . Curse him, it’s either that or he’s suddenly jealous that June and I——”

He passed among the palms and oleanders and riot of flower and foliage, biting his lips fiercely.

“My God! She was made for me. Not for him

—an iceberg, a fool money-spider ! It was meant that my arms should hold her, my lips should have her ! And they shall—*sacré*—they shall ! She is a bit afraid now. But, presently—she will come to me, or I to her, and—later, he shall pay through the nose ! ”

And turning a corner in the long stretch of glass-houses, he came suddenly upon June just entering an octagonal rosery from the terrace. With her were a fat little middle-aged Baron and his seventeen-year-old young wife (to whom the former had recently given his name and its social status in exchange for a most remunerative fortune). The latter was already seeking solace in the company of a good-looking young officer of chasseurs, a few paces behind her husband's back, and in the complete chaperonage of Maisie Frowle, who was palpably bored.

The Comte had taken an intense dislike to Maisie Frowle, but on this occasion he welcomed her as assisting numerically a readjustment of the grouping. Which, very subtly, he presently carried out, so that June and he were left alone.

They passed, at first in a somewhat nervous silence, along the terrace, from the far end of which came the chatter of the guests, drifting with a reminder of the world near at hand.

“ This is the first opportunity I have had of

saying how very sorry I am for the unfortunate happenings of this morning," murmured the Comte presently, after they had paced the tessellated pavement time enough for the silence to become almost strained.

She looked up at him with her air of innocent sympathy.

"I was so glad you were not badly hurt," she said. "Everything happened so quickly——"

"It was all my fault," he murmured with genuine contrition. "I am afraid, both as horseman and—host—I rather forgot myself this morning."

The strained silence fell back upon them, till he broke it abruptly.

"I hope you have forgiven me," he said, his voice conveying a deeper meaning than his words.

She laughed in her infectious way.

"You could not prevent the horses from running away!"

"That was not altogether what I meant," he stumbled, leaning towards her. She turned away from him her dimpled cheek upon which a red flush had spread and then vanished swiftly before a sudden pallor.

"I am sorry," he murmured. "I said things—rashly—too soon——"

She looked up at him suddenly out of clear eyes.

"I think you will not say them again," she said definitely.

He looked away awkwardly towards the crowd at the other end of the terrace towards which they now faced.

"Which means that you have forgiven me."

"Mistakes should always be forgiven. It is only deliberate——"

"We are to remain as good friends as ever?"

"Why not?"

"Why, indeed? And, believe me, I am your friend—a real friend. If—you are ever in need of one, you will remember that, won't you?"

"Of course. You are my husband's friend, aren't you?"

"Certainly."

"He told me once—before we were married—that you were his only friend."

He laughed drily.

"Your husband does not make many friends. He is a rather—unusual man——"

"Yes," she admitted. "I think he must be one of those men who need a lot of understanding. I am afraid I have—said some rather foolish things about him to—you——"

The Comte laid his unslung hand reassuringly on her arm.

"It was because of them—partly—I said things

rashly this morning," he said. "It was a mistake——"

"It was my mistake in the beginning then. I was wrong to discuss my husband with you, Comte——"

"Is it not then still to be—Raoul?"

"Then—Raoul. This morning rather brought me to my senses. He did a brave thing——"

"Which I should have imagined only possible in a man who was a born rider!" laughed the Comte almost with a flavour of bitterness in his voice. "I am still puzzled over—that side of the question."

"James puzzles me. He is——"

She broke off abruptly and changed the subject.

"He tells me, by the way, that you are unable to go to Switzerland with us," she said on a note of polite regret.

He nodded; and that expression of ill-temper spread again over his face, where it had been indeed, though for the most part discreetly veiled, all the afternoon. In fact, ever since after lunch when June's husband had looked in again at his room for a moment carefully to emphasise the fact that he had now definitely changed his mind—with many apologies—as to the Comte troubling himself to join them in the Swiss trip. It had all been very

affably intimated, and accepted with an equally polite friendliness. There would have appeared to be no cause whatever for any ill-temper.

“ I should have much liked to have been with you, as was at first intended,” he said, and added cryptically with a shrug of his shoulders : “ But—I hope you will have a jolly time.”

“ You know how I have always longed to go to the Alps ! ” she exclaimed with a girlish enthusiasm. “ They must be so grand and massive, and with their great cold glaciers—— ”

“ You will be glad enough to come back to the warm sunny valleys,” he laughed, and leaned towards her in that insolently intimate way of his which he seemed incapable of losing for long. “ They are like you, those sunny valleys, just as the great cold glaciers are like—— ”

“ Here is your husband coming towards us,” he said with his twisted smile.

She saw him moving slowly through the crowd, over whom he towered considerably. With him was a smartly dressed little woman whom June did not seem to remember having seen before. The two were carrying on an animated conversation in which they were apparently both intensely interested.

“ That,” indicated the Comte almost as though he had read her thoughts, “ that is my cousin, the

Baroness Marie de Bergerac. A good soul, but a shocking crank. During the last year or so she has gone mad about Buddhism and reincarnation and all that sort of thing, you know. Tommy-rot, of course ; but she quite believes in it. She is quite a prominent patroness of this mountebank business in Paris. Built a temple for it, and is always discovering reincarnated souls. She promised to plague us to-day with her latest. A swindle, of course ! Somebody ready to make money out of a silly woman who has more than she knows what to do with ! Actually—your husband told me just now that he believed in the nonsense—— ”

“ Perhaps he does.”

“ It's the first I've ever heard of it, really ! Upon my word, if I didn't know that he never made a joke and hardly knew what a joke was, I should have thought he was pulling my leg. But he was quite serious, and—— ”

At this moment the little Baroness caught sight of him, and turned sharply towards them,

“ Ah, Raoul ! ” she exclaimed with animation, and apparently cutting off her conversation in the middle of a sentence. “ I hear you have been giving me the worst of characters, you bad boy ! And I am not surprised. I have been discovering for myself that your friend, Monsieur Dant, is a much more human person than you led us all to

believe. Indeed, I have already come to regard him as a great soul——!”

“I am glad to hear that, Marie, and am accordingly repentant,” retorted the Comte caustically. “Meantime, let me introduce Madame Dant—also a great soul, I assure you.”

The Baroness had a delightfully simple personality, friendly at once and an enemy to all formality.

“My dear,” she said, studying June’s face, “I am not psychic, but I can see it. Your soul is in your eyes, and they are very beautiful.”

“When a woman says a thing like that——!” laughed the Comte, and was silenced by his cousin who began vivaciously to take him to task over the riding accident of the morning, from which subject she jumped with her spritely mentality into an animated discussion on aeronautics and the development of the elements as subservient to the human will; from which again, at the sight of a figure approaching them along the terrace, she returned to her favourite topic of souls.

“Now here, Monsieur Dant, comes the treat I promised you,” she exclaimed, her hand tapping his arm excitedly. “A real reincarnation of a great soul! She is the third of my discoveries! The first two, I admit, were rather doubtful; but this is really a genuine discovery. Professor Valvache

—you know him, of course, the great psychic and occultist!—he is quite certain about her. He has tested her! In a psychic condition she has made the most wonderful statements which cannot be refuted. He has taken her back in her mental state very far—very far. Without doubt, it is proved that she was no other than Cleopatra—actually Cleopatra! And, if you look closely, you can observe physical lineaments which undoubtedly indicate Egyptian origin, slightly eliminated and changed by time, of course—but, see the proud bearing, the grace, and the eyes—the wonderful eyes——!”

She was still at a distance and, beneath the rather large hat she wore, it was not quite possible to see the face of the girl, who was approaching with one of the Comte's sisters. Grace and a pride of carriage she undoubtedly possessed.

“I found her, Monsieur Dant,” whispered the Baroness excitedly, “in one of the slum streets of Paris. Up by the Luxembourg, on a top-floor room in the—what was it now?—ah! the rue Paradise! The very antithesis of Heaven——!”

“The rue Paradise, did you say?” he questioned slowly and almost under his breath.

“A dreadful place! Quite poor, of course. And—I made her my secretary and companion. A quite charming girl!”

At which moment the girl reached them. With the brim of her hat raised, they could see her face which the eyes alone certainly beautified. They were wonderful eyes, taking in slowly the faces of those waiting for her, the Comte, June and the Baroness, who at once introduced her :

“ This, Monsieur Dant, is Mad'moiselle Lucille Defarges ! ”

“ Why—surely ! ” gasped the girl. “ Why—surely—this is Monsieur Johns—Monsieur Johns of the next room to mine in the rue Paradise ! ”

Her big eyes searched his face excitedly and with evidently increasing belief in their correctness.

“ Why, no, my dear ! ” laughed the Baroness. “ This is Monsieur Dant, the English financier ! He would not even know where the rue Paradise is to be found, would you, Monsieur Dant ? ”

“ And I am not at all anxious to know, Baroness,” he laughed with an admirable inflection of total indifference.

“ I am sorry, m'sieur,” murmured the girl apologetically, and laughing now herself at her evident mistake. “ But there was somebody, also an Englishman, a friend of mine, who was so like you—— ”

“ It is very curious,” she thought to herself several times as they walked towards the house,

into which by now most of the guests were withdrawing out of the chill air. And :

“ It is very curious ! ” muttered the Comte to himself also. “ There is something wrong ! There certainly is ! If ever I have seen fear in a man’s eyes before—— ! ”

It is curious how the world, hiding its secrets behind the barred doors of its tongue, yet so often forgets to pull down the blinds over its windows.

XI

CHAIN OF CIRCUMSTANCE

CIRCUMSTANCE, that idle fellow who must so often thrust his lounging personality between humans and their mental objective, sometimes to the foiling of their plans and always to their great irritation, prevented Raoul, Comte de Louvre, for a while from doing more than probe and probe into his own mind as to the real cause of that blaze of fear alight in the eyes of Mr. James Dant, financier and millionaire.

Naturally, that cause was, in the first place, to be sought most properly from the lips of Mad'moiselle Defarges. But she, in the first instance, was not to be drawn, although the Comte—playing his perfected game of lady-killer with quite excellent effect—had inveigled her into the fountain-splashed rosery after dinner and plied her with diplomatic pressure in that cunning way which was his forte.

And afterwards, Switzerland having swallowed up June and her husband and the Frowles according to time-table, he had hied himself presently to

Paris, there to make inquiries at the rue Paradise where might have lived a certain Monsieur Johns, and whether such a person was, by chance, yet to be found there.

Which inquiries led him along the cobbles where the garbage sulked in that sad little street, to the very door of No. 13 and—its fat little concierge. Who, dear soul, read in the immaculate spruceness of the Comte's suit, his velvet Homburg with its feather behind, very jaunty, the gold knob of his malacca cane, the car which had carried him here to the extreme cleanliness of his costly footwear, all the fascination of Dives. She curtsied low before Dives. She flung open the door to him. She loosened—what needed loosening of—her tongue. She was, in a word, the slave of Dives. Whatever he might ask——

Monsieur Johns? Ah, the dear man! So respectable a patron of the buildings! One of the very best quality of English gentlemen! So munificent out of his little store! What a pity it was that he had not been born rich. Yet he had rich friends. One could see that—with a species of genuflexion before the glitter of the Comte's diamond tie-pin—of course, one could see that!

She thought it must have been one of his rich friends who had enabled him to go away for a

while. Oh, yes ! He had gone away. To America, she believed. He had talked vaguely about catching the boat, and only taking enough luggage to get quickly through the New York customs. . . . When ?

The precise date on which he went ? Now that was not an easy question to answer ! Dates were things which she never could remember exactly. It was a foggy night—she remembered that. A foggy night on which a rich friend had driven up in a very beautiful car and asked for Monsieur Johns. She did not see the rich friend go ; but Monsieur Johns had called down to her for his little account, and—gone. . . . Yes ! She remembered the date ! Of course ! How stupid of her. It was of this month and corresponded with the number over this door ! The thirteenth ! An unlucky date on which to start on a journey ; but, no ? She recollected having said so to Monsieur Johns. And he had been almost rude ; which was unlike him ! Would Monsieur like to see his rooms perhaps ? They were being kept for him.

Monsieur saw no urgent reason. But, slipping a ten-franc piece of gold into the fat hand of the concierge, he asked her if she could describe Monsieur Johns to him. It was, he said, a question of tracing an old friend. . . .

The car of the Comte de Louvre travelled swiftly to the head office of that great shipping company which plies the Atlantic from France. Excitement burned in his eyes as he ran a finger down the list of sailings. On the fourteenth, at noon, the *President Faure*! That, without doubt, must have been the boat. A search into the passenger list of the first and second classes, however, gave no result. It was not until a clerk had run through the third-class bookings that the name of Johns was found. Without doubt, Mr. Johns had sailed on the *President Faure*. He had, it was stated, landed at New York.

From the shipping company's offices, the Comte sought a place where he could think. It was a problem requiring much quiet thought. Comparative quiet he found at his club, where the smoke-room was, at that hour, fortunately fairly deserted. An acquaintance, it was true, came right up to him at his entry and flourished a copy of that morning's *Matin* under his eyes, with an urgent question as to whether he had seen the latest Bourse news, and another one as to what his well-known internal knowledge of the Great Gamble made of the exciting crisis of which the papers were full and everybody was talking.

As a matter of fact the Comte, busied with more intimate things, had not seen the papers, and cared

nothing about what they said. For the moment, he was not interested in finance, and his acquaintance therefore departed with an air of distinct chilliness, mumbling as he went :

“ Upon my word, I think the world's gone mad ! ”

Which was what, by the way, the newspapers were all saying of the share market ; and, incidentally, precisely what the Comte was thinking.

For the more he pondered over this puzzle of James Dant, and the apparent duplicate of James Dant who had lived in the rue Paradise but had now suddenly gone to New York, the less he could find any sane argument as to its solution. Of course, there must be some solution, just as there must have been some reason for that blaze of fear in the eyes of James Dant when he was mistaken for this elusive Mr. Johns by Lucille Defarges.

And, though he returned the next day to that sad little rue Paradise near the Luxembourg, there bribing the fat old concierge with more of the donations of Dives in exchange for as much information as she could be persuaded to give concerning Mr. Johns and his history, he learnt little of help in the solving of his problem. Indeed, almost he had given up the affair as a harmless case of casual likeness and a foolish misreading—on his part—of James Dant's eyes, when chance put in his way one of those phlegmatic English business men whom

he had met more than once at Dant's house in Park Lane.

The meeting happened at the Comte's favourite restaurant in the rue de Rivoli, where he had arrived for dinner. It suited the Comte excellently to play the host, as he proposed with his innate hospitality of a Frenchman; for it would be a relief for his mind from this ridiculous nightmare he was pursuing and, somehow, could not force himself to abandon. The Englishman was mildly relieved not to be forced to a lonely dinner. He was a widely travelled man, and a good talker in his quiet, reserved way. With the earlier courses of the dinner the Comte heard much of interest concerning the many corners of the world to which his guest had been. Over the *ponche romaine*, the talk was of Canada.

"It was there that I met Dant's brother, by the way," remarked the Englishman casually.

The Comte dropped a spoon with a clatter.

"Has Dant a brother?" he gasped.

"Why, yes. A twin brother, so like him that you couldn't tell one from the other. Didn't you know? Of course, you mightn't. The name of John Dant is never mentioned, you know. A rotter—out and out. He died out there. A couple of years ago, I think. Of frost-bite, it was said. He was expelled from the Stock Exchange, you know. Something

rather dirty, I imagine. Nobody ever did know exactly. It was kept very quiet, and he was bundled out of the country neck and crop. Quite right too, for Dant's a decent fellow. The funny part about it is that his brother, to talk to, wasn't half a bad sort. A genuine sport. I was going to tell you, apropos of my meeting him in Canada, that I saw him out there do a bit of bareback riding that would have beaten the devil himself to do better——"

"Ah——!" murmured the Comte in his soft purr, and leaning over the table with tensely folded hands. "He was a fine rider, was he?"

"A perfect devil."

The Comte listened with almost deaf ears to the Englishman's story with a vivid crispness which was typical of the man. And, all the while, he was revisualising that dramatic moment of a few days back among the woods near the château Louvre, when he had been flung to the ground amid a clatter of wild hoofs. . . . And the sequel, as it had been told him, of James Dant riding quietly up to the château with June slung across his saddle in front of him. . . .

"Anyhow, he's dead now, poor beggar," said the other.

And the Comte, looking out through the window, where in the street below Paris seethed and noised

and was busy with its real day by now in full swing, laughed dryly.

"I suppose that is certain?" he questioned.

"I have always understood so. But there has been such a thing known as a dead man coming unexpectedly to life again," was the cautious answer.

And the Comte laughed dryly once more.

After which, the conversation turned into the drier fields of business and the making of money, apropos of James Dant's financial cleverness.

"By the way," said the Englishman. "It's rather unlike Dant to be out of things at a time like this, isn't it? Here's the market all upside down, and he's—honeymooning, isn't he?"

The Comte nodded. He knew now that he had not been chasing a nightmare. In a flash, he saw deeper things behind the problem of the fear in James Dant's eyes, and the empty rooms of Monsieur Johns in the rue Paradise. For the rest of the meal the Englishman and his phlegmatic talk of men and things drifted right into the background of his mind.

The Englishman parted company after dinner with a stolidly founded opinion that the wine must have been peculiarly potent to affect a Frenchman so rapidly and distinctly.

And the next morning the Comte motored

hurriedly back to the château Louvre, where, by the way, he found a letter from Bergenplatz, which expressed the hope that he was doing his utmost to keep well in touch with James Dant. There promised at this moment to be substantial reward for such kindly services, big things being on the way.

Which letter the Comte, impatiently, pushed away with the others in his locked drawer, and drove over for lunch to the delightful place which his cousin, Marie de Bergerac, had in the neighbourhood. Those deeper things which his mind had realised behind the personality of James Dant needed consolidating. They were just now mere fragments of inspiration based upon no more evidence than the flimsiest reasoning. Together they amounted to a mad certainty that James Dant was not James Dant, but his supposed dead brother. For what reason could only be wildly guessed. Was it possible that Dant could have deliberately given over his wife to his brother? That was absurd. Then—had some crime been committed? That also seemed absurd. What then meant the voyage of the elusive Monsieur Johns to New York? And yet——

Out of his turmoil of wonder the Comte could only find one straw at which to catch in faint hope of help. There remained Mad'moiselle Lucille

Defarges, who had refused to be drawn about this Monsieur Johns. This time she must be drawn, in case she could throw some light on the darkness.

But Mad'moiselle Defarges, by the rude intervention of circumstance, did not happen to be to-day at the château Bergerac. She had gone, so said his cousin in answer to his discreet enquiries, to visit a great occultist at Lille. She would return, no doubt, to-morrow, or the day after, or perhaps next week !

So a full week and a half had gone by before the Comte, who dared say nothing to anybody of the nightmare he pursued, came any nearer the solution of the problem. And, meantime, he could think of nothing but of June in Switzerland, innocently honeymooning with a man who was not her husband ! Of that important part of the problem, the Comte was certain. It was the part that raged him, sent him impotently pacing the Italian terrace in fury. June, little June, on whose account he hated Dant, whereas before he had merely borne with him as a stepping-stone to greater wealth. Whatever the truth at the back of this inextricable maze of facts, one reality stood out vividly like a white milestone on a dust-shadowed road. June was being infamously treated. All innocent, she was in the clutches of a scoundrel who was batten-

upon a marvellous facial and physical resemblance. She must be warned ! He ended by believing himself to be quite honestly in love with her !

But, if warned, would she believe ? As the affair was crudely reconstructed in his mind, the Comte saw that the very cunning of it, the daring of it, made for incredulity. It would be exceedingly difficult to prove, possibly even impossible to prove that the real James Dant was not the man who was with June. As likely as not June would be the very first person to accuse him of folly, perhaps even worse, in making such a statement. She ought to know, seeing that she had married him. Indeed, until this background of curious coincidences had thrust itself under his notice, the Comte himself had never doubted for a moment but that the real James Dant had been his guest, so perfect had been the impersonation !

And, in the next breath, the Comte would ask himself if it was an impersonation after all, or had he taken leave of his senses ?

The only final answer to this question, he realised, was to be found *when the man Johns, who had gone to New York on the " President Faure," was found !*

He had, in fact, decided no longer to wait for such chance information as Mad'moiselle Defarges might give him, if eventually persuaded, concerning

the elusive Mr. Johns of the rue Paradise. He had determined to run into Paris and see his friend, Monsieur Boitre, that clever private detective and inquiry agent who was regarded as second to none in the business of unravelling mysteries and tracing the apparently untraceable.

Boitre, as a matter of fact, had only recently earned a very heavy remuneration over an affair which had been put into his hands through the Comte's instrumentality. He would undoubtedly take up this matter for next to no outlay (which was always a consideration in the Comte's mind), and his friendship would ensure his absolute silence, which was essential for June's sake. Also, he could command unlimited help from the New York police, an absolute necessity for success.

So to Boitre the Comte had set out by car. And on the way, as is usually the habit of that very contrary gentleman, Circumstance, who is always absent when most needed, but inclined to appear on the scene when not expected, he all but drove over Mad'moiselle Lucille Defarges near the gates of the château Bergerac. She was, it transpired, walking to the station with the purpose of training to Paris.

It would have been unreasonable of her to have refused the Comte's amiable persuasions to go there more comfortably in his auto, especially as

the weather was threatening and, clearly, a storm might be expected on the scene with every passing minute.

Which storm came swiftly, as a matter of fact, before they had travelled any great distance. For this time of the year too it was an unusual storm, with heavy thunder and vivid lightning in the vanguard of it. Mad'moiselle Defarges had a nervous terror of lightning. She cringed at each flash and hid her face, which, as the Comte had long since observed, was not without quite a striking beauty of—in Marie de Bergerac's words—an Egyptian type. Indeed, the Comte found much fascination in her wonderful eyes, with their expression of terror, and her hand was very soft as it touched his when she clung to him.

So that, by the time the storm had slackened to mere rain, they were on more friendly terms than one evening in the de Louvre drawing-room had warranted.

He was a man who rather inspired confidences of women ; and she was soon telling him something of her history. A history, far from uninteresting it seemed ; a stormy history.

" I suppose that is why I cannot bear storms," she said. " I seem to have lived in a succession of—fate storms," and added reminiscently as if suddenly struck by a memory :

“ Though I suppose my real horror of lightning is because I once nearly lost my life by it.”

The Comte, busy with the wheel, murmured polite surprise. To tell the truth he was scarcely listening to what she said, puzzling in his mind how he might best introduce the name of that elusive Monsieur Johns of the rue Paradise into the conversation.

“ It was in the woods at Fontaine—do you know them—not far from Paris? Perhaps you don't. They are beautiful woods, and I was staying there for a short holiday some eighteen months ago. It was foolish of me, but I walked far, so far as to lose myself. And a storm came on. A worse storm than to-day. Lightning——! Mother of God! Such lightning! Forked! I was horrified, and breathless with running madly. You know how dangerous it is to be caught among trees? And, just as I reached what I could see was the main road I saw a man coming, also running. He called to me: ‘ Get away from the trees, little one!’ For, out of breath, I was leaning for a moment against a tree-trunk. And—la! Before you could breathe almost, there was a crash—I saw just his white face and hand stretched out to me—and there was a shock and—just blackness. The tree was struck and the man! But how not me I do not know. Only stunned, I was. He was a bit paralysed.

There remains an indelible mark on the palm of his hand where perhaps he touched the tree—a little mark like a fern pattern——”

Under her breath she added absent-mindedly :

“ He was good to me, my Monsieur Johns——”

And—suddenly looked up, laughing half-hysterically as if, carried away by her story and its memories, she had said more than she meant to, and hoped to hide it.

But the Comte was staring down at her out of eager eyes.

“ Ah ! ” he breathed quickly. “ The Monsieur Johns of the rue Paradise—— ? ”

“ Why, yes ! ” she stammered.

It was not to Boitre, after all, that the Comte drove his car, when he had put down Mad'moiselle Defarges at her destination in the rue de Lafayette, but to his flat overlooking the Tuileries, there hastily to order the packing of a suit-case, and to look out the first convenient train to Switzerland.

And, in the course of a few hours, he had left Paris by the Geneva-Milan express. Connections with this would, his time-table had informed him, bring him to Interlaken with the following morning. And at Interlaken he should, according to his reckoning, catch the Dant honeymoon party.

In his reserved compartment, he imagined

already that this meeting was taking place. And, taking off his glove with an exaggerated gesture of a conjurer who would intimate that he has nothing concealed up his sleeve, he turned up the palm of his hand and stared at it with a dry laugh.

Unfortunately that idle fellow, Circumstance, lounged here again across the path of human purpose. In the night-hours, the Geneva-Milan express left the rails unexpectedly and was badly crumpled up.

And, among those who were carried away on improvised stretchers in a more or less damaged condition, was a gentleman, whose pocket-book carried upon it an elegant golden L beneath a coronet, and within it several letters addressed to "M'sieur le Comte de Louvre."

XII

AVALANCHE

SUNRISE had tipped the eastern face of the Jungfrau with living fire, a flashing coronal which turned that snow-capped mass into a torch thrusting its way out of a rugged bed of madder-browns and purple depths and green slopes.

Bells of goats and low of cows were soft, spasmodic music on the ear among the nether gradients of the mountain ; and, below these, rose from the gaudy clusters of palatial hostels and the like, which be the heart-beat of Interlaken, a reluctant hum of slow returning human animation.

The scarlets and creams and blues and green-shuttered vividness of it seemed desecration of Nature, as viewed from the nether gradients. A footmark of Mammon which, thankfully, a gentle haze half hid from above, and tempered to the eye so that its gaudy uncouthness was not too irritatingly blatant.

From an amused survey of it, the temporary Mr. James Dant turned to continue his climb up the mountain path. The greens and purples and soft

browns, with which Nature had coloured the earth and all that thereon grew, were more grateful to his eyes. Behind him a panorama of peak on peak in wide-sweeping arc of horizon glistened and sunned itself, a colossal glimpse of the earth's crust in the crude. The fine air had the stimulus of old wine.

He drank it in with avidity. How unlike, was this, to the cramped, chimney-pot atmosphere of the rue Paradise ! How unlike, this life of luxury and splendid ease, to that which he had left there in that sad little street of sulky garbage !

He felt this morning that he could never go back to it. This adventure, quixotically connived and accepted, had served to lift him marvellously out of his rut. To the rue Paradise he knew now he could never return longer than to settle his few affairs and get him hence into a broader world again. But what world ? This, upon the nether gradients of the Jungfrau, was his problem, which had obsessed him more and more with every passing day during this last week. He must make up his mind what his future should be. Not the Seine, nor any premature ending of things ; but a future that pulsed and was free and had such air and breathing space about it as this.

And quickly he must decide. On the waters of Lake Lucerne he had thrown away torn fragments

of that cable addressed from New York to Mr. James, care of the post restante of that town. Which cable had given him his warning for evacuation.

“Guillaume Tell,” it said.

According to the hotel bureau, the *Guillaume Tell* had sailed now two days. The end of this adventure was, therefore, at this moment well in sight. In some ways he was distinctly sorry. In others, intensely relieved. But, without doubt, he was more relieved than sorry.

His action in politely removing the Comte de Louvre from the immediate vicinity of June, at any rate until her husband had returned and could please himself as to the future, had naturally necessitated a closer companionship between June and himself. The Frowles, it was true, had helped to prevent this from becoming irksome and—inconvenient. But June herself had seemed of late rather inclined to override the convenient barricade which they provided, and had found her woman's ways of unwittingly neutralising their effect. And yesterday evening, to make matters worse, a telegram from home to Lady Frowle demanded her immediate return, owing to the discovery that Sir Septimus, poor man, must undergo an operation for appendicitis unexpectedly.

Which untoward incident flashed upon the

temporary Mr. James Dant as a harbinger of embarrassing possibilities. So much so indeed that he had almost suggested a return to France and even, if the Comte could put them up, a visit to the château Louvre before going on to Paris, where, by the way, he was to hand over his charge.

But, questioning June subtly to find out first the lay of her mind, he had discovered that, if anything, she was disposed to regard the departure of the Frowles with relief.

"One can sometimes enjoy a little quiet," she had said dryly, having no doubt reference to that organ of speech which Lady Frowle kept always in fine fettle.

"You would not like to—return to Paris?" he had suggested.

"I hope you will not insist upon it," she had pleaded in a way that intimated possibilities even of tears. He capitulated, rather than face any chance of tears.

"I am afraid you will be frightfully bored with—just me," was his plea.

"I might—much prefer that," she flung at him with a little laugh, as if she had propounded a pleasant riddle for him to guess.

So that this morning he was in nervous mood. He dreaded the three or four days that must pass before he took her back to Paris and followed the

prearranged plans by which his temporary Dantship should be taken from him. He would have given anything if, turning the curve of the tortuous path he climbed, he could have come suddenly upon the real James Dant and ended the whole nerve-racking business there and then.

But, round that curve he came suddenly upon a grassy plateau, with June sitting on it, all smiling and fresh and lovely in the morning light.

"I saw you coming up ever so long ago," she laughed up at him. "I thought you were never going to get here at all!"

"And I thought you were safe in bed!" he laughed back at her, not disguising his surprise.

"It shows," she retorted thoughtfully, "how much you know about me, James. I have been out, sometimes before you, every morning since we left France!"

"Have you, by Jove?" As a matter of fact, he knew she had. On more than one occasion he had been obliged to arrive late for breakfast through avoiding meeting her on these early morning walks.

"It is good out here!" he said, looking round at the view. He had upon him again at this moment that curious fear of her which had obsessed him with gradually increasing force of late when alone in her company for a few moments.

"Beautiful! Let us go up to that old hut. It

looks interesting," she suggested, pointing to a chalet perched ahead of them on a spur of the mountain.

They talked little on the way, which was steep and needed a careful foothold. But, now and again, she stopped in her climb ahead of him, and pointed out some delight of Nature, some glimpse of the snow-capped Jungfrau, some flower, a herd of goats in a valley below, begged him to listen to the music of cow bells, pointed to a curiously shaped rock.

Her voice was fresh as herself, with the glow of health in her cheeks, and her red lips that were like flowers in the morning. The sun played in and out of her copper-gold hair which was hatless, and became a halo round her lovely face. Her hand that grasped her alpenstock was white and dainty, and yet clearly full of young strength. Walking behind her on the narrow path, that white hand, as the Alpenstock swung with it, tantalised and seemed to mock him.

The chalet was a rest-house for mountaineers starting upon or finishing the ascent or descent of the Jungfrau. It was empty and closed, for the season when the snow peak above Interlaken might be tackled in safety by the generality of climbers was over.

"I should have liked to have stood on the top

of it," she said softly, wistfully eyeing the ice-covered mass above them. "Lots of people seem to have done it. It looks—not so very difficult."

"With a good guide," he said, "it is not."

"Have you ever been up a mountain, James?" she questioned suddenly.

He looked round at her sharply with his lips parted to speak, but closed them abruptly, and laughed.

"I don't fancy it," he replied, looking up at the peak.

She laughed softly.

"And you—hated—riding!" she murmured mockingly.

"It is sometimes necessary to do things one—hates," he retorted, and pointed out to her—more than anything with a fierce desire to keep off dangerous topics, of course—a brass plate fixed into the hillside to the left of the chalet.

"Let us see what that has to say," he suggested, moving towards it."

They found it to be a list of names beneath a statement that their owners had on this spot lost their lives in a great avalanche of some ten years back. It was a goodly list of names, over a score in number.

June turned away from it, rather white-faced for a moment.

“What a horrid thing to put where people can read it before they start climbing!” she exclaimed. “I think that would quite unnerve me before I began! I shouldn’t want to risk——” She looked up at the sunlit crest of the Jungfrau with its cold fields of ice, and shuddered.

“Risk is half the sport of climbing!” he laughed, touching her arm to draw her away from her fascinated gaze at the brass plate, and added: “At least, so they say.”

“And, by the way,” he continued. “Don’t we risk becoming very hungry soon if we don’t turn back for breakfast?”

She agreed, apparently glad to leave the place.

“This air gives me a dreadful appetite,” she laughed. “It is wonderful air. It is wonderful here. Look—look at that view—it makes one feel——”

She stopped in her descent of the path at a curve from which a great panorama lay spread out before the eyes, spectacular in its massed grandeur, marvellous in its rich colouring.

“It makes one feel——” she repeated, and seemed to pause for sheer lack of words.

“How small and very far from good one is,” he murmured in completion of her sentence.

She said nothing, merely throwing a half-frightened glance up at him from under her lowered lids, and passed on down the path.

Not till the descent had become more easy and the path broader so that they could walk side by side easily, did she speak again. Interlaken, with its hum of life grown louder now and more strident, lay close beneath them.

And when she spoke it was evident her mind still lingered with the brass tablet they had left behind.

"It doesn't somehow seem right that twenty lives should be so suddenly, one might say wantonly, thrown away!" she said abruptly, and with a little shiver. "It makes one wonder what they had done to deserve such a dreadful death."

"Why should death be dreadful?" he murmured absent-mindedly.

"Such a death as that!"

"Death, however it comes, cannot be dreadful," he said on that same note of far-away thought.

"But death, swift and sudden, unreasonable, un—undeserved!"

"We all deserve death, because it is the common lot, the one certainty of our future," he retorted.

"And for the same reason there should be nothing of dread in it. On the contrary, we should be glad when it comes. And those who are left behind should be glad for those who are gone. If we lived as we ought to live we should have no dread of death. It is dreaded only because it is so little understood. What is it? It is like you and me,

standing down in that seething, stuffy town of Interlaken there, and being suddenly lifted up to here in the pure, fresh air. It means that our spirit sheds its manhood and reassumes its godhead. Death should be met with music and glad hearts, not with crape and horror. I myself——”

He broke off suddenly to find her staring up at him in amazement, and passed a hand over his eyes with a gesture of impatience.

“ I myself am talking a great deal of nonsense,” he added with a sharp, dry little laugh. “ It must be the need for breakfast. I am always more or less light-headed in the morning before I have had a good meal ! ”

Followed a silence as they went on side by side down the path, which had now become a road.

Presently, she laid a timid hand on his arm that swung to and fro as he strode along.

“ I want to tell you something, James,” she said softly.

Her tone struck a chord of uneasiness in him.

“ That there is something you have seen in one of the shops you want me to——” he began with a rather forced lightness ; but she shook her head.

“ I want something of you, yes,” she said ; “ but nothing that can be bought.”

“ I give it up ! ” he laughed with a puzzled air.

“ I want your forgiveness.”

“ For what on earth ? ”

“ I said some very hard things to you that—night—in Paris,” she answered.

“ My dear June—— ! ” he protested. “ Without doubt you too are light-headed for lack of breakfast. Let us——”

She held his arm firmly in her little hand.

“ You must listen to me,” she insisted with an emotion that shocked him to the abrupt silence of his laughter.

“ I want you to forgive me for saying those things in—Paris. I was wrong. Every day since, you have shown me in one way or another how wrong I was. I thought I knew you before I married you. But you are quite different from what I thought. This fortnight and more I have learnt a strange lesson. It is as though I had known one man and married another—almost. Only—of course, I haven’t. I imagined you hard, cruel, a business ledger. Instead, you are able to talk of God, and be kind and thoughtful. And, brave. . . . You are a puzzle I cannot solve.”

“ If I were you I shouldn’t try,” he said hastily.

“ And as for what you said—in Paris——”

“ Please try to forget it,” she said. “ At least ”—she touched him with a quick, anxious movement of her fingers—“ that part which was unkind. I don’t mean—that—I love you. That isn’t possible,

is it? We did not marry for love, did we? Perhaps—perhaps it may come——”

He stared ahead of him at the town they neared, at the broad streets with their trees and seats, and the giant hotels in their well-dressed grounds.

“Perhaps——” he said, non-committally, mentally leaving the redemption of this semi-pledge to the real James Dant.

“But we can be more like man and wife than we have been?” she urged timidly. “I mean—we are now little more than acquaintances forced to travel in each other’s company. Not even with the mutual confidence and—familiarity of brother and sister. Surely we——”

She stumbled with her words and came to a sudden silence.

“Why, of course!” he assured her. “If you feel that you can bring yourself—would be happier——”

“I am happier this morning than I have been—for years and years!” she whispered.

“I am glad of that,” he said, still avoiding her eyes.

A few paces further along the street, she added with a naïve inconsequence:

“I am glad Sir Septimus has appendicitis!”

“Good gracious, my dear! Why——?”

“Because—Lady Frowle isn’t at all the kind of

woman to have with you on a—holiday," she said innocently enough.

He laughed lightly, but was heavy of heart. Personally, he had only now discovered the real value of Lady Frowle. He was wishing fervently and quite uselessly that Sir Septimus could have been considerate enough to defer his wretched appendix trouble for, at any rate, another four days. After which, he himself would not have been interested. But, as things stood now in the wake of this heart-to-heart talk, he could not have expressed in words the dread with which he must carry on his game alone. Till now, it had been a simple game enough, a sheer game of bluff with nothing really harmful at the back of it. But, from now on, it did indeed begin to take that shape of the job he had first imagined it—a job of a born rascal, a consummate hypocrite, a rogue adventurer.

At the hotel she ran upstairs for a moment, leaving him to lounge into the smoke-room for a glance at the papers before breakfast. He went in there covertly glancing at his hands for the stain of uncleanness upon their palms.

At least, he thought to himself as he picked up the printed slip which gave the latest news telegrams from all parts of the world, the time left was not long. Already the ship with the real James

Dant was ploughing the waters of the Atlantic in hot haste to sight the shores of France.

And he flung out a quick, sharp cry as he looked for a second time and less idly at the printed slip in his hand.

The following stared him in the face :

GREAT LINER LOST

“ The French liner *Guillaume Tell* is reported sunk in mid-ocean on its way from New York to France. Wireless calls brought several vessels hurriedly on the scene, but nothing was found except wreckage. In the terrible storm which was raging at the time it is feared no lives can possibly have been saved.”

XIII

SWIRLING WATERS

It was not until, after keeping strictly to the pre-arranged time-table, he and June had arrived in Paris that he allowed himself once and for all to realise the dreadful thing which had happened.

At first, in a stupefied way, he had understood that this ocean tragedy must necessarily add to the complication of his task. No doubt, the real James Dant would presently be picked up in one of the boat-loads of survivors, which—like everybody else—he believed would yet be found to be somewhere on the face of the swirling waters, waiting for rescue. If this proved to be so, of course it would not be possible for the real James Dant to reach Paris for some days to come, perhaps for weeks.

Which unwelcome fact he faced with a stoical indifference quite consistent with that character which, in the rue Paradise, had contemplated the advantages of the Seine over any other form of suicide. He viewed the situation from all its stand-points without great interest, preferring to study

its consequences more closely as the hour to meet them approached.

But, as time passed, he began slowly to gather from the more complete reports of the sinking of the *Guillaume Tell*, as they reached the world in hesitating fashion, that the chances of there being such a mythical boat-load with the real James Dant in it were small indeed. At last, however, he proved right in part. A boat-load was rescued. The cablegram that notified this promised that a list of names of the survivors should follow shortly.

It was upon the night when he and June returned to Paris that the list was published in the evening papers.

But nowhere in the list was to be found the name of J. Johns !

And it was stated definitely that there could be no hope whatever for any passengers of the ill-fated liner, whose names were not in that list.

This verdict, with which it would have been suicidal to quarrel, forced itself upon him as he went to dress for dinner.

The real James Dant, therefore, was dead !

Unless——

But what immediate purpose could be served by dragging in that indefinite and disturbing word “unless” ? The official statement of the shipping

company left no doubt in the mind of any reasonable person. It summed up a matured opinion by the people most concerned in the disaster. Also, the accounts of the survivors in that rescued boat unanimously agreed that theirs was the only one of the liner's boats that survived launching. The rest had either not been launched at all, or sunk, once they had been sent adrift in the raging sea. Everything, as read in these accounts, seemed vividly clear as to the last moments of the *Guillaume Tell*. The only matter to which the shroud of mystery clung was the cause of her sinking. This, in point of fact, has remained a mystery which Time has not yet solved.

But the point which alone concerned the temporary Mr. James Dant was that the real Mr. James Dant no longer existed.

Consequently, his wife was a widow.

Also, from this moment, the temporary Mr. James Dant had no earthly excuse for existence.

And yet, what could he do? Vanish and creep back into the rue Paradise in his own self-created personality of Monsieur Johns?

Watson found his master in extremely irritable mood that night during the operation of dressing.

"More like 'is old self, 'e is!" he remarked to June's pretty maid when the *salle à manger* had commenced to be busy. To which the

pretty maid retorted on the lines of home-made philosophy.

“It’s like that with Love,” she said dreamily. “All ups and downs contrariways. Madame now”—and she aped a well-bred intonation after the instinctive fashion of the lower classes when referring to the upper—“madame now is very ‘up’ for the last day or so. It is really quite interesting to be you and I, Mr. Watson, looking on—like.”

June undoubtedly was quite in merry mood. Looking across at her over their flower-banked table, the living image of her husband compared the eloquent light-heartedness of her lovely face to-night with the memory of her face as seen in this same hotel three weeks ago.

It was as though a forbidding shutter had been lifted from it to show the simple, happy soul beneath. It was indeed no surprise to him. The shutter had not lifted swiftly but by a gradual process, beginning markedly from that morning on the nether gradients of the Jungfrau. He had watched with an awed wonder the slow revelation of her real self which the lifting shutter showed him fragment by fragment in its ascent.

Those days, from that morning till now, had passed for him mentally quite obversely. As the mercury had risen in her, so it had sunk in him with

the gradual realisation of the impending sequel to that ocean tragedy, the fear that his boats had not been burnt behind him, but swallowed by the sea. To his great relief, she had seemed to pay but little attention to the drama of the lost liner, beyond to complain rather irritably that the papers seemed to be full of it to the exclusion of brighter and more interesting news. She seemed to convey to him the impression that these days were ill-fitted for gloom and the black circumstance of mourning. The tears of other people seemed out of perspective in her eyes, which wanted only to regard and fill her mind with the beauties of the world immediately around her, the stimulus for happiness which the mountain air had for her.

So, in secret, he had gnawed his secret, hoped against hope with all his innate wealth of optimism that this dreadful thing had not happened.

And to-night, watching her across the table, he knew it had happened, and that she must be told.

Sparkling burgundy sizzled in the wine-glass with the stem of which his fingers toyed nervously. It had never sizzled there for long. The waiters had been exceedingly attentive ; and he—he felt again to-night in that devil of a mood of his which swallowed wine as it engulfed the future with haphazard callousness. Out of his maze of thought, one thing and one thing hammered itself into his

brain in certainty of purpose. She must be told. . . .
She must be told. . . .

But—a born rascal, a consummate hypocrite, a rogue adventurer—his face showed nothing of the tornado that raged behind it. He sparkled as did the wine in his glass. As if in sympathy with her lifted shutter, and perhaps out of a reckless knowledge that there remained now no need for him to understudy the stern aloofness of the real James Dant in every sentence, line of thought, gesture, expression of face, he expanded and glowed and pulsed with a richness of mentality that held her fascinated. He felt at this critical moment that, whatever the outcome, the last day of this queer honeymoon must be happily remembered by her.

They were in undecided mood as to what should happen after dinner. Good plays were to be seen at most of the theatres ; but, June had said :

“ I am tired of theatres. I want to try to forget that such things exist, and that I ever had anything to do with them. I am afraid I was never an actress at heart. The stage is so—unreal. At least, such of it as came my way. And to-night—somehow, to-night, I feel I couldn't sit quietly in a seat anywhere. I don't feel that I want to be doing anything definite. I am restless—like that crowd out there in the street. To mix with it and go along not caring where one was carried——”

“An inspiration!” he laughed. “We will mix with it, and—see Paris. Come——!”

And so, out into the streets, indifferently, casually, arm-in-arm, in mood like a pair of children. But, despite apparent careless wandering with and against the flood of chatting, laughing Parisians, she realised that he guided her with some more or less definite motif. He seemed to know his Paris at least well enough to show it to advantage.

It was the hour when Paris really throbs with life. The noise and clamour of it were infectious. The many happenings, bizarre and vivid to the English mind, which punctuated their progress and were so eloquent of the Parisian and his *joie de vivre*, the clamour and music and light-heartedness, the cameos of passion and full-blooded purpose, the lights upon excited, merry faces, daring toilettes, uniforms which seemed of *opéra bouffe* extravagance, the little cafés everywhere all crowded, the odour of cooking in oil, the all-pervading perfume of Paris—were all in their mood, which was for to-night and to-night only.

With his haphazard daring he had led her by devious routes to the Luxembourg. Here, at a picturesque turning, whilst they hesitated for a moment which flood of humans to follow, came people running from a side-turning in haste, and shouting. It was not an instant before they realised

what all the clamour meant. Smell of burning drifted from somewhere pungently. From where they stood they could see of a sudden a great sheet of flame leap up into the sky above house-tops.

“ A fire ! ” he laughed.

“ And what a panic ! ” she laughed back, watching the excited crowd with fascinated eyes. “ I should like to see the engine and how they manage fires here.”

He led her by the arm in the wake of the crowd, hugging the skirts of it for safety.

“ It seems to be a big fire,” she exclaimed as the red glow in the sky grew more and more pronounced and the smoke quite dense in the street. “ I wonder where it is——”

Answering nothing, he knew already, with his intimate knowledge of all these streets. He did not need to hear the sharp call of one little boy running to a woman who had stopped him with her question.

“ Dans la rue Paradise ! ” he had shouted back at her in his shrill pipe.

“ What did he say ? ” laughed June.

“ He said it was in the rue Paradise,” answered her companion.

“ The—rue Paradise—— ! ” she repeated, and suddenly gripped his arm. “ Why that was where Lucille Defarges lived, and mistook you for someone she knew there ! ”

He pulled her aside out of the crowd which was being pressed backwards, apparently by the gendarmes.

"It is not too safe here," he said. "Better get out of this! There will be nothing to see anyhow. Some old house burning——"

From where he stood, towering over the heads of the people, he had been able to locate the house that burned. It was the fourth of those barrack-like structures from this end of the street. The number over its door, he knew quite well, was—thirteen. The upper stories were well afire. . . .

Back with her in the more aristocratic part of Paris, they sat for a few minutes outside a café which had attracted her attention by its naïve scheme of decoration. Thirsty, she drank lemon squash out of straws. He, with some slight hesitation, ordered an absinthe, but cancelled the order, and had a liqueur brandy.

Sipping it, he sat thinking furtively of that night, three weeks ago, in the rue Paradise, where he had left two or three francs' worth of absinthe in a bottle. Bottle and room were burnt by now to a scrap-heap. . . . It seemed almost as if Fate had purposed this new thing. . . .

From the café they went slowly back to the hotel. June was feeling contentedly tired.

"Thank you very, very much for to-night,"

she whispered softly to him. "I shall never forget it."

Behind his mask he trembled like a child in agony of approaching punishment. For the life of him he could not—tell her what his lips had been framing themselves to tell her. He could not blight that memory with the cruel truth. He dared not cloud that lovely face which to-night seemed more beautiful than ever in its bright-eyed happiness.

To-night, at any rate, that happiness must be allowed to go to slumber undisturbed.

And while yet he was convincing himself of this necessity, though realising that dawn and the evil day must be met courageously, relief came to him for the moment with the appearance of the Crayshaws, man and wife, who met them in the lounge. Their greeting and talk drove his great secret from his mind for a while.

The Crayshaws were going back to London in the morning. It was suggested that, if the Dants were going too, the journey would be more pleasant in company. In which, for the time being anyhow, the living image of Mr. James Dant acquiesced, seeing that June, who rather liked the little Crayshaw woman, seemed to like the idea. She was full of the unique evening she and her husband had spent strolling round Paris. Mrs. Crayshaw had just been staying for a few days at a house near the

château Louvre. She was dryly humorous in her views on French country life.

"By the way," she said suddenly, "you have heard, of course, of the Comte de Louvre? Wasn't it dreadful?"

June expressed innocence of any dreadful happening to the Comte.

Alick Crayshaw's little bird-like face showed surprise. He thought everybody had heard about it.

"Mixed up in that Geneva-Milan express smash," he explained in his crisp way. "Jolly lucky he wasn't killed! But probably be crippled for life! Lying at death's door in Geneva ever since, they said. Called at the château, you know, when we were in the neighbourhood, and left kind sympathies and cards and so on. Family dreadfully upset apparently. Didn't even know he had gone to Switzerland. Most mysterious!"

The story threw a momentary shadow over the face of June, who could not understand how she and her husband had not noticed any mention of the Comte's name in the accounts of the train smash which they had read. But these, it was true, they had read very casually. They had, indeed, rather seemed to avoid reading the papers. But she was sorry for the Comte. So was her husband, very sorry.

Looking across at her, as she chatted with Mrs. Crayshaw, quickly moving on to topics in happier vein, the living image of Mr. James Dant found himself wondering whether, when she had learnt the truth and, more or less, passed through the first tortures of horror, wounded pride and shame at the deception practised on her, June would turn to the Comte—if he lived—for the love which every woman craves, and was hers at his hands for the mere asking. . . .

And the mental problem was pushed aside by a sudden outburst from Alick Crayshaw, who clapped him vigorously on the shoulder.

“By gad, Dant! I nearly forgot!” he was saying. “I’m much in your debt! Meant to thank you when I saw you next. Those shares I mentioned to you—you remember you advised me to buy—that Peruvian mine——”

“Yes, yes. I remember now. You bought, as I suggested?”

Behind his smile of knowing indifference, he was wondering whether his advice, given casually and from sheer need to act up to his rôle of financial genius, had borne good fruit or bad.

“I did. Heavily; in fact I rather plunged—you seemed so optimistic. And if I sold out to-morrow I should walk away with four times my investment.”

"And, if I were you, I should sell, Crayshaw," said the other.

"Would you, by gad?"

"I should."

"I will, Dant. What a genius for finance you have! Though, I suppose, there must be some risk with it——"

"Risk!" laughed the other. "I should think there was! Risk! It is only risk that makes life worth living. A man who will risk nothing——"

He flicked his fingers in contempt.

And, presently, alone in his room, having persuaded Watson that there was really nothing more that he could do for him to-night, he stared at his own face in the mirror, as he had stared at it once before in that same room some three weeks ago.

He had taken risks, and lost—lost badly. He had taken all the risks that his impersonation of his brother might be discovered, all the risks which his own ability and their remarkable resemblance to each other could help to nullify. But the risk he had not taken into account—the risk that the hand of God might be thrust suddenly out to thwart and crush this stupid man-laid plot——

In her rooms behind the closed door of cream-tinted wood and gilted ornament, June would be lying in her bed innocent that it was the bed of a widow. To-morrow she must be told. And the

fingers of the clock were dragging slowly towards to-morrow already.

He crouched in his chair upon the arms of which his fingers writhed and twisted in a nervous frenzy. . . . He sat in that way for fully half an hour, motionless and staring into the fire. Then slowly turned to the table at his side, with its decanter and syphon, and glass that was invitingly empty. Lifting the decanter, he became suddenly aware of a letter on the salver. Watson had, he recollected, drawn his attention to it more than once ; had, indeed, rather irritated him by his persistence. What did letters addressed to James Dant matter to-night ? James Dant was dead. Almost, he could see the spirit of James Dant beckoning him to hurry up and be gone. There was no longer any need for an understudy, for the character had made his last exit out of the drama. But how should the understudy make his exit ?

And idly he tore open the letter, unfolding it with careless fingers and regarding it cynically. He read it once through, scarcely realising the meaning of its contents. Then sitting upright and more alert in his deep chair, read it a second time.

It was headed with the printed address of James Dant's office in Capel Court. It was undersigned with the name of R. J. Burke, who was by way of

being James Dant's chief clerk. The letter itself was written clearly in nervous, excitable mood bordering on panic. Amid a maze of figures and financial information which filled the first part of it, there ran a vein of complaint that James Dant had not dealt fairly by his office in leaving it to weather the terrible storm before which the present panic-stricken market swayed and bent and crumpled. The writer protested that he had done his best under the most difficult of circumstances, but that the situation was now more than critical. A short paragraph summed it up :

“ There still remain several days before settling-day. But I am afraid, with the present trend of the market, that we shall never be able to meet settlement. I am afraid that, with our quite inadequate holdings, nothing short of a miracle can save us in so short a time from going under the hammer. May I beg that you will wire me in the morning your instructions ? . . . ”

He laid the letter down on the table and mixed himself a strong drink.

“ Good lord ! ” he muttered, and again : “ Good lord ! ”

Then, gulping down his drink, rose suddenly to his feet and crossed the floor to his bedroom. Presently, he returned, weighing in his palm a little nickel-plated revolver.

"That letter and—this——" he mumbled to himself looking down the barrel of the thing with one eye half humorously closed. There was even a note of amusement in the tone of his voice.

"I could do it so that it made little noise," he muttered, "and—very little mess. It was thoughtful of my brother to keep one of these in stock handy. Very handy—the one real way out of the difficulty. Not much—real trouble for June, and—I should have a jolly fine funeral, and—June——"

And suddenly looking up and staring stupidly at the cream and gilt door between his room and hers, he remained for a moment with parted lips and silent.

Then, he picked up the letter from the table and reread that last paragraph again.

"Under the hammer!" That meant that June would be—that she was already practically penniless, unprovided for——!

He laid the revolver above the letter on the table with a swift, decisive movement.

"That won't do!" he muttered, and rose to his feet, striding the carpet backward and forward from wall to wall.

And, presently, halted in front of that mirror which showed him his face, stern and fiercely calculating as that of the real James Dant.

“James Dant mustn’t be dead yet awhile,” he whispered. “Not till—he has tried whether he can put things straight for the little one——”

After which he picked up a time-table and began to study the boat-train connections to London.

PART THE THIRD

XIV

PIZZICATO

SPRING is come to London. Very belated, it is true, and showing himself at first shyly, as if understanding that he has no real excuse to offer for being so far behind time-table. But he is Spring, and is so fresh and kindly and full of colour and warmth, that what matter time-tables and tardiness so he come at all ?

And he is come with brave panoply of green tree and riot of bloom and merry sunshine and sweet-scented air—aye, even in London—which do make ample amends for a most wretched and prolonged winter. London looks up at him with cheerful face and nods in kindly way, and says whilst still hustling about its business :

“ That’s better. Get on with it ! ”

The news editors of the *Daily Mail* and *Evening News*, who have especially naïve minds for nice little weather stories, juggle with bright thoughts about the “ man who had forgotten his straw hat,” and “ the lugubrious umbrella-seller in the Strand—the only sad face in London.”

London, by the way, is very full just now, and those who fill it seem in buoyant mood, as befits the radiance of Old Sol, and the colouring of flower and fashion which meet the eye everywhere. Bond Street and the West End are merrily alive. You have there an impression of kindly awnings, busy restaurants and tea-shops looking delightfully cool, of flowers hawked and worn on every side, of fashion exhibiting herself in her newest phases. Spring colours are everywhere in the late afternoon sunshine, spring blitheness, the spirit of reawakening after a long sleep. Even the drab architecture of London seems to have thrown off its appalling gloominess and becomes transformed with an unusual attractiveness.

But it would perhaps have been difficult to find in all London a more pleasant spot this afternoon than the garden which belongs to the Park Lane residence of Mr. James Dant, the well-known financier. As seen from the window of the great drawing-room, it is a restful picture of green trees and shady nooks and velvet lawns, with just sufficient of splashes of colour from flowered borders here and there to please the eye without irritating it.

Here Mrs. Dant is "at home" to quite a large assemblage. The two lawns (of such beauty and dimensions as you might never have supposed could be stowed away in the heart of West End, London,

where every inch of ground is of fabulous worth) are thronged and are a pretty sight with the riot of dainty Spring tints worn by the women against their background of green. Hidden somewhere from sight in a grove an orchestra plays in pizzicato mood exquisite music. To the liquid notes of strings is added the plashing of fountains in their sparkling basins.

Deserted tea-tables around a huge marquee on one of the lawns indicate that the official motif of the assemblage is a thing of the past. As a matter of fact, the crowd of guests is already thinning appreciably. Discreet flunkeys are managing a steady and correct flow of motor traffic by the front porch.

Mrs. Dant herself is on the terrace outside the drawing-room windows gracefully accepting farewell handshakes from some of her more intimate friends among her guests.

As if in harmony with the afternoon, she is radiant. Her afternoon gown, very simple and elegant, only serves to enhance her youth and beauty. Among this very worldly and cynical company she has the appearance of a mere child. There is a girlish unaffectedness in her speech and gesture which are arresting and too rarely to be found in that Society which scintillates around her slender figure.

You realise, however, that this same Society carries itself very respectfully towards her. From conceding to her the throneship of the most beautiful woman in London, it has passed to recognising in her possibly the most popular hostess in Town. Something of which is perhaps due to the fame and wealth of the man whose name she bears. There is to-day no more talked-of man in London than James Dant, financier and millionaire, who was said in expert City circles to have stood six months ago on the brink of bankruptcy, but now by mere genius had created one of the most sensational fortunes ever known to the money-market.

But—setting aside all the natural results of this feat as affecting Mrs. Dant—she undoubtedly deserves her high status among London's hostesses on purely personal grounds. You recognise that there is marked friendship in the eyes of those who come in contact with her, real admiration, a genuine recognition of a charming personality. Society has been brought swiftly but unobtrusively to realise that this girl, who had been nothing but a little musical comedy actress before she married Dant, has risen to her responsibilities with a marvellous *savoir-faire* quite unexpected of her.

And Society is the greatest of all sycophants.

The present company includes many very exalted members of it. Mrs. Dant has just escorted to the

drawing-room a foreign Prince and Princess, and two Duchesses have followed hard in the wake of their Royal Highnesses's departure. The lips of the flunkeys at the front porch mouth quite a number of aristocratic and famous names in their formula which brings each time a fresh, glistening automobile under the shade of the awning.

It is not until the crowd on the lawns has become very much lessened that Mrs. Dant seems to lose for a moment her expression of smiling radiance and so shows it to be a veneer beneath which a less superficial emotion surged. This happens as she is chatting with Alick Crayshaw, whom recent months has lifted, through the death of a father (who, by the way, disliked him very furiously), from the dubious status of "Honourable" to the scarcely less dubious honours of a Viscounty.

"Here comes James—at last!" she says under her breath.

"Fresh from making more money—by gad!" cackles the Viscount, his little bird-like face nodding as he watches the tall figure descending the terrace steps with the precise, business-like stride of James Dant.

"He looks very tired," sighs June, going to meet him.

In his black, well-fitting morning-coat he looks both tired and hot. His face has all the pallor

which is inevitable to City life. He has begun almost to stoop slightly and wearily as he walks. His mouth is firm-set and stern, and his eyes glance quickly from side to side with a liveness and brightness which are almost feverish.

He smiles in a languid way at June, and nods to the Viscount.

"I looked into that little bit of business of yours, Crayshaw," he says, using by force of habit the old name which came more readily to the tongue than the new peer's less euphonious title of Ballichonel. "The shares are quite good and likely to mount rapidly——"

The little bird-like mouth pecked avariciously.

"Jolly kind of you, Dant. Thanks for the tip. 'Pon my word, what I must be owing you for professional advice, old fellow——!"

The other laughs and turns to June.

"Apparently I owe not a little to you, June, by the way," he says. "That is, if one sets much store by an offer of inclusion in the birthday honours list——"

"A knighthood?" she questions eagerly.

He makes a swift motion commanding caution.

"It is—of course—quite confidential."

"But—I am glad!" she murmurs, looking up at him out of shining eyes, and adds with a soft little laugh: "Though what I have had to do with it——!"

“ Who then has been assiduously cultivating the Prime Minister for weeks past ? ” he taunts her with a chuckle. “ Not I, certainly. And, as the three strings which work the birthday honours Jack-in-the-box are Money, Political Influence, and Woman, I—not possessing any political influence, nor yet having presented the Government party machine with a substantial cheque on any account—can only infer that the Prime Minister, who is notably susceptible to the charms of a pretty woman——”

“ There you are, Lady—Dant ! ” chirps the little Viscount. “ Twenty to one on you ! ”

“ Of course that is all nonsense ! ” laughs June. But she is visibly flattered and pleased. Pleased to some extent, as any woman would be pleased over an honour to her husband. But, behind the smile on her lips, is a tremulous impatience, and, at the back of her eyes, a mood of sombre conflict. She knows that this knighthood has arisen out of his genius alone. She knows that, by the wheels that are within wheels, he has been as useful to the Government as to himself. She is pleased enough at his reward, which she does not regard as anything more than adequate. But she is groping back mentally over these last months in town. For her, they have been empty months, just as to-day has been empty—till now.

"You promised to come home to lunch, James," she says reprovingly. "Surely you could have left that horrid old City——"

"Couldn't be done," he replies shortly. "I tried to, but—one or two important things turned up——"

Departing guests claim June, and the terrace becomes a turmoil of chattering tongues, of which she is glad to hear the last. It is some time before she is presently alone, only to find herself cornered by her secretary, who needs her signature to some important letters.

These settled, she mounts the broad stairway with her first signs of weariness in her step. Watson, meeting her on a great square landing, answers her question in his stiff way :

"Mr. Dant, madame, is in 'is horfice."

It is a word she hates, that word "horfice." It is a great gruesome ghost that is always haunting her. Involuntarily, she chills at the sound of it. And, a second after, is imagining to herself, with a little laugh of irony, how Watson would answer her question in a few days' time. She can imagine the smug self-satisfaction of his note :

"Sir—James—milady, is in 'is horfice !"

So, she is smiling as, having knocked gently and received an answer, she opens the door of that holy of holies.

He is at his table which occupies the centre of the great room and has the air of being used for unending work. Papers are littered all over it. He has apparently just been using the telephone, the receiver being still in his hand.

"May I come in?" she questions diffidently.

"Why, of course, my dear!" he answers, dropping the telephone receiver into its holder, and pushing aside the papers on the table in front of him. "Did you want me—particularly? Well, of course you did, or you wouldn't have——"

"No," she says. "Not—particularly. Not—more than usually, James. Only—I haven't seen anything of you all day. I rang you up this morning, but——"

"I was out, I suppose. Sorry. But, talking about ringing up, who do you think was just on the 'phone to me?"

She shakes her head.

"How should I know?"

"De Louvre."

"From France?"

"No. From—somewhere here—his club—or hotel or wherever it was——"

"He is well again?"

"Apparently. He is in London anyhow. Wanted to come along and see us to-morrow. I suggested he should come along and stay with us——"

She turns with a sharp little gesture of impatience.

“ Have you forgotten that we are going down to Brazenhurst on the day after to-morrow ? ”

“ Not at all, my dear. I thought perhaps, if he came down there to us—and we might ask the Bergeracs who fortunately are still here—it would be less dull for you.”

She crosses, without answering, to the window out of which she stares at the Park, which is thronged with its democratic evening crowd.

“ Why should it be dull for me at Brazenhurst ? ” she questions.

“ It struck me that you might be a little bored—just ourselves——”

“ I am not at all keen on the Bergeracs,” she says petulantly. “ And the Comte de Louvre—unless you personally want to invite him——”

“ He accepted at once,” he interrupts on a vexed note.

“ Then I suppose that settles it.”

“ We could—no, I can’t put him off ! As a matter of fact, the wretched ’phone was so confoundedly indistinct I didn’t quite catch where he did say he was staying——”

“ Besides, it would scarcely look well to cancel an invitation without good excuse, which we haven’t——”

“ I’m awfully sorry.”

“My dear James—you are master in your own house——”

He looks down at the pile of papers before him, and thence at the big room with its sumptuous furnishings, and thence again, covertly, at the girl by the window. And, as he glances round the room, his lips are creased in a mocking smile which, when his eyes under their lowered lashes drink in the beauty of her as the red glow of the declining sun lights up her profile, vanishes before a wave of passionate tenderness that transfigures his face.

With her back almost towards him she cannot see his face. Nor would it be easy indeed at this moment, for shadows of gloaming lie thick where he sits at his table.

“Still,” he says, “if I had not been struck with the idea that you would probably be intensely bored down at Brazenhurst——”

“Why should I be bored?” she rounds on him fiercely.

“Well—it’s a dull place, as you know. And—just ourselves——”

“James,” she says softly, and stepping swiftly up to the table, “do I usually bore you?”

“Great Heavens, my dear—no!”

“Do you think you would be bored with—just me—down at Brazenhurst?”

“ I ? Oh, I wasn't thinking about myself ! ”

“ But—thinking about yourself just by way of a change, James—would you ? ”

“ Of course not ! ” he laughed. “ The only thought in my mind was that you——”

“ I ? I see so much of you, do I not ? I am so incessantly in your company here in town that I need an opportunity to be away from you for a while ? I——”

She seems to be choking back a torrent of words, fumbling for a moment with one slender hand at her white throat. When she speaks again it is with evident, almost startling restraint.

“ Next week, James, over five months will have gone by since we came back from our honeymoon,” she says. “ Five months in which it would be strictly true to say that you have spent the greater part in the City. During those five months you and I have met—at meals. It is no exaggeration to say that. And, even of meals, we have had few alone. I believe I could count upon the fingers of one hand the rare occasions since we came to town that you and I have sat at table without the intruding presence of a third person. They have been five months of incessant social hustle, either of entertaining or being entertained on my part, and on yours—of scurrying in and out of the City, not to rest but to rush round an endless circle of nerve-

racking functions among a crush of people who are——”

“Mighty useful to us—sometimes,” he interrupts and laughs up at her on a note of badinage. “As, to wit, the evolution of Mrs. Dant into—milady——”

She touches his hand upon the table timidly with one of hers.

“Has it been worth it, James?” she questions under her breath.

“I had hoped you would think so.”

“I do—in a way. It is worth it because this knighthood is your reward. That makes it worth a great deal to me. It helps to repay you for all those dreadful weeks immediately after we came back, when I scarcely saw you at all—and then only white-faced and haggard and with never a word to say to me, no confidences to share with me——”

“I don’t mind telling you now,” he says with a dry laugh, “that in those days it was a matter of touch and go——”

“That is no fresh news to me. I knew that two days after our return to London.”

“You—knew? Why nobody knew except myself and——”

“Burke.”

“Do you mean that——?”

“ I happened to go to the telephone in my room, and—I suppose you hadn’t switched off the connection between your room and mine—and you were talking to Burke—no more plainly than you would talk on a ’phone, but enough for me to realise the possible calamity——”

He motions her abruptly to silence.

“ We pulled through anyhow very nicely,” he says. “ The best thing now is for you to forget what you heard. It is all over and done with and cannot possibly happen again. I never intended you to know anything about it. That was why I warned you to pay no attention to any rumours you might hear. I did not want you uselessly worried——”

“ And now,” she interrupts him, “ you do not want me to be—bored—by spending a few days alone with you at Brazenhurst ! ”

“ What possible connection can there be—— ? ”

“ This ! ” she lashes scornfully. “ That you do not understand me ! Either blindly or wilfully you are holding me at arm’s length still——”

“ The unusual circumstances of our marriage——” he tries to intervene ; but she is not to be silenced.

“ In Switzerland we came to an arrangement, you and I,” she says. “ You promised that we should at least have between us the ordinary ties of—brother and sister. Trust, confidence, a sense

of belonging to each other, not because we were obliged, but out of inclination. Can you tell me that those days in Switzerland—the last time we were really together—were unhappy days? Did I bore you, or you me? Was there restraint between us, any memory of that wretched marriage? James—I——”

She stammers awkwardly and turns away from him towards the window. As he rises softly from his seat, he sees her face in the glow of the sunset, that it is swept by unconcealed emotion. To hide his own he pulls a cigarette-case from his pocket and lights one, his fingers fumbling nervously with the vesta on the silver striker.

“They were very happy days for me, James,” she continued. “They showed you to me in a new light, and I saw myself and things—differently from before. By the time we returned to Paris, I was no longer dreading the weeks and months and—years—that I must spend with you. I think even that I—looked forward to them. That last night in Paris——”

She breaks off, laughing moodily.

“After Paris—the flood! Everything was changed. You became the cold hard rock that I first knew you to be. Back in London, you were lost, so far as I was concerned, in the City—in business—in the urgency of pounds, shillings and pence.

Of course, I know why ! You were keeping yourself—and me—from ruin. You were saving us, dragging us back from—perhaps the gutter, I don't know——”

“ You have put it in a nutshell,” he laughs, watching her from his wreaths of tobacco smoke.

“ You saved us. You did more. Out of what was happening in the City—I don't understand these things—you made more money than you ever had. More, you prevented what might have been a national calamity by smashing that German-American trust——”

“ I must certainly depute you to write my biography one of these days, my dear ! ” he laughed at her cynically from out of the smoke and shadows that hid his face.

She comes closer to him with her quick, graceful movement of girlish impulse.

“ Then you must tell me more of yourself,” she says. “ I heard none of these things from you. They were left for me to hear—through the telephone—from the papers—from other people ! That excuse that you did not want me to be worried over the crisis—in our—affairs—is reasonable enough. But, James, it is not what was arranged between us. Have you forgotten those long talks we had together during the last few days of our—queer honeymoon ? During the last five months I have

over and over again wondered if I had only dreamed of them ! James, why have we gone back to the old, icy beginnings of this wretched marriage ? Are these weary five months of rush and tear and whirl of social slavery and—utter emptiness—to go on indefinitely—— ? ”

He turns away from her and throws his cigarette with a quick nervous gesture into the hearth.

“ I warned you,” he says hoarsely, “ that you must be prepared to find some—difference in me when I settled down again to the routine of business. Out there—it was all holiday, and—nothing mattered—— ”

“ Nothing ? ” She peers into the darkness at him for a moment without moving. “ Then—it was—just amusement ? ”

“ Exactly,” he murmurs. “ I—— ”

Follows a moment of silence. Then the telephone bell on the table tinkles softly.

She moves slowly towards the door.

“ I—I think I will ask one or two other people to join us at—Brazenhurst,” she says deliberately, and adds coldly before she closes the door behind her : “ You will not forget—will you, James—that we are dining at Manchester House to-night ? ”

The telephone tinkles its staccato little stabs of sound into the darkness for some seconds before

he moves wearily to the table and sinks into his chair.

And there, before taking up the receiver, he switches on an electric light. It shows his face, very white and haggard, and with the eyes tightly closed as though they would shut out all light from the picture they held behind the lids.

"Who is it?" he asks of the telephone impatiently, and learns that it is his confidential clerk who wants, with many apologies, to verify some statement his master had made to him during that afternoon.

"Oh no, Burke," he murmurs into the instrument. "Did I say that? No, no. It should be exactly the reverse. . . . Yes. . . . Yes. Perhaps I did say so. . . . I'm afraid I do sometimes say things I do not mean. . . ."

XV

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AND yet he had meant what he said to June. Meant it, because he must.

"Then—it was—just—amusement?" she had whispered at him out of her halo of fading sunlight.

"Exactly," he had murmured in reply.

And dared not have replied in any other way.

It was the first time he had actually lied to her. In all these months, throughout all this adventure of deception, he had not yet permitted himself a word of deliberate untruth in answer to anything she might ask. But now, forced to it by her suddenness of attack and with his back to a wall, as it were, nothing but a lie would have sufficed.

Because he loved her. Because he worshipped her. Because his mind carried her always in the forefront of it, and his body wanted her. Dreadfully, the hands and the lips and the flesh and blood of him wanted her.

He wanted the wife of James Dant, who was somewhere at the bottom of the sea. He wanted

her so badly that every moment spent in sight of her, within touch of her, was a moment of physical torture so exquisite, so terrible as almost to madden him.

And he knew that, at a word and a mastering touch, he could take her.

Looking furtively over his shoulder at her there in her halo of waning sunlight, he had felt the blood racing hot in him with the certain knowledge of it, and the pounding of his heart had come near to suffocating him. He could have spoken that word, lifted that mastering finger-tip. . . . There was no one to say to her that James Dant lay somewhere at the bottom of the sea, that the word and the finger-tip carried with them no hallowed sanction of the Divine. . . .

Which things he dared not tell her himself because his body craved for her. Nor yet dare he take her and leave them unsaid, because his soul worshipped her.

It is always between the valley of Good and the pit of Evil that the Lie squats upon a crag, grinning and with friendly hand extended.

The sea had swallowed the real James Dant. His understudy long since recognised utter futility in believing otherwise. At first, in spite of every

evidence to the contrary, he had hoped against hope that every day might bring him warning of his brother's safety, that his brother might suddenly appear in person to claim his right place in the world, and release the adventurer out of the rue Paradise from his false position. But the days piled on days, the weeks on weeks, and the months on months. Gradually probability dwindled into possibility, and thence passed outside the pale of credulity. The real James Dant was undoubtedly dead. He need be no more taken into consideration.

And, meantime, the turmoil of Throgmorton Street had brought with it ample food for thought, cunning work for the mind, fierce combat for the fighting spirit to wage. James Dant himself would have relished finely the task before him.

Nor did his understudy approach it flinching. On the contrary, as a tonic for his condition of nervous feverishness, he welcomed it, plunging into it with a zest and inspiration that had even astounded himself.

That slipshod, devil-may-care spirit of the rue Paradise fell from him as if it had been a cloak. This man who loathed figures and high stools and dusty ledgers slipped swiftly and silently into the throne of James Dant among these detested things as if he had loved them all his life.

In the forefront of his mind was the fierce need to save June from wreckage. Everything else but that was obliterated from his mind. They were amazing days, those first few weeks after he stalked into the offices in Capel Court with just the characteristic air of the real James Dant. Amazing days crammed with immense risks, vivid with swift demands upon his powers of impersonation, nerve-racking in their ceaseless need for watching of words, gripping of situations, meeting of crimes. Only a man entirely inspired could have surmounted them safely, as he did.

The situation which he had found awaiting his readjustment presented, as set out by Burke, a task for a Titan. The books of the firm spelled bankruptcy, which it seemed that nothing short of a miracle could stave off. It was evident that the office was mystified by the unusual laxity of its head in leaving it to flounder as best it could through the past days of panic.

"Before you went away, sir, you did mention to me that you would come back instantly if there was any urgent need," observed Burke, sullenly aggrieved. "But, though I wrote you repeatedly——"

It was not for Burke to know that he had not read those letters, but filed them all away for the real James Dant to read at leisure on his return.

It was only possible now to frown petulantly, and to dismiss Burke with the air of a man who has supreme command of the situation and anticipates no difficulty whatever in straightening it out.

Which, as it happened, was an air well justified. He remained in his office for nine hours on end, poring over books, files of newspapers, tables of figures. The clerks in the outer office hustled through the usual routine of the day, throwing now and again a furtive glance of anxiety in the direction of the closed door that hid their chief from them. Now and again Burke was called inside, sharply questioned, and returned again to the outer office, his long sphinx-like face giving them no intimation of what was forward. Closing time found them still sitting till the great Mr. James Dant should be pleased to leave first. Seven o'clock struck before that closed door was suddenly opened, and he came out. He was smiling in that way which they had learnt to regard as a prelude to one of his big coups. They watched him pass out into the streets, and felt curiously relieved. There was indomitable mastery in his stride.

And for him, as for them, the worst was over. The next day the office throbbed and pulsed with activity. It seemed as though it had taken a new lease of life. Queer coded cables were despatched in scores, telephones were busy, both local and

trunk. Burke dashed hot-foot here and there, with a face all mystified surprise. Lunch was only snatched hastily. Mr. Dant was on 'Change most of the day. He seemed to be perfectly cool. It was not until late afternoon that the market began to appreciate any results of his presence. A whisper floated out of nowhere in particular down the seething street and down in the underground cafés with their clicking dominoes. Top-hatted members rushed hurriedly to learn Wall Street prices. . . .

The office at Capel Court closed light-heartedly at its normal hour. Things were afoot, good things, it realised. The crisis was well in hand.

By settling day it was, for the moment, met and crushed. Between them and next settling day there was ample time to smash its Gorgon head to a lifeless pulp. The office of Mr. James Dant breathed freely again.

Himself, he took little breathing-space. The fever of Mammon was in his veins, coursing through them like fire. Almost as though he were an Elisha upon whom the cloak of Elijah had fallen, he had become imbued with the fierce flare of the Great Gamble. He began instinctively to think money, figures, subtle schemes of finance.

He had met the crisis in a more or less simple way, beginning with his knowledge—which was a closed book to anyone else—of the man Johns

whose arrival in New York had sent the markets suddenly leaping and bounding frenziedly. Back out of the past had come, added to this knowledge, his half-rusted formulæ of calculation and financial divination. Over figures, and between lines, he had begun to piece together the fabric of the plan which had sent that same Johns to the States. The fabric, once built up, showed itself a masterpiece of financial strategy. All that it had needed was the pinnacle of completion. That pinnacle could only have been set upon it in London. But the builder had been swallowed by a sea as greedy as himself, perforce leaving that fabric wind-swept, useless. Worse than useless, he left that which must inevitably fall with a crash. . . .

It was freely rumoured in the City that James Dant had pulled himself back adroitly from the brink of ruin. Bergenplatz, in a towering rage, followed settling day with a wholesale sacking of his clerks. He had made certain that James Dant's honeymoon would prove his business winding-sheet. But then, those spectacled Teutonic eyes of his could not see that fabric built in New York, now standing erect and powerful with its pinnacle capping it.

So he never knew how it was that the wind blasted out of its doors and began to sweep him before it. He never could understand, in the weeks

that followed, how the rock of his own financial edifice began to tremble and shake and was presently discovered to be slowly being swallowed in a quicksand. He went under, as a German always goes under, blustering filthily. . . .

And closing winter found the name of James Dant hurtled hither and thither on the March winds into the ears of every man. A name symbolical of juggling with wealth, as was that of Napoleon of the essence in military genius, or Nelson of the living spirit of sea-power.

It was when he had stepped out of the drawing-room windows of his house on that bright Spring day into the presence of June that, almost for the first time, he had seriously allowed himself to recognise what, in weariness and nerve strain, those five months had cost him. As, in her presence too, there faced him a far more dreaded problem than any he had faced in the City.

At that moment, covertly reading her eyes as she heard the news of the knighthood which had been offered him, he saw in a flash that he stood upon cross-roads which he had blindly imagined to be still conveniently ahead of him.

As she had reminded him in the half-lights of his study, they had met but little during the last five

months. So much he had subtly contrived, partly for her sake, more perhaps for his own. For she had, he was sure, no clearer memory of those last few days of that queer honeymoon than had he. They were all the happiness his life had ever known, crammed into a few mad hours. They were a mirror into which he had looked and seen love. And, seeing, been horribly afraid. . . .

How he had expected it all to end, he had not asked himself. That was the spirit of the rue Paradise. He had recognised that sometime the cross-road sign must spring up in the fog in front of him. But, with the fever of Mammon on him, sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof. Wrapped in his aloofness of the great financier, he had done his utmost to chill any tendency she might show towards more than superficial intimacy. Indeed, he believed that he had safely neutralised the effect upon her of those honeymoon indiscretions of his. She had been of late cold and unemotional as when he first knew her.

Till, in the twilight of his room, she had flung her woman's bomb at his feet. It was all that he could do at the moment, to lie clumsily.

She had evidently taken him at his word, and equally fulfilled her own.

A quite considerable house-party joined them at

Brazenhurst, which old Elizabethan mansion on the Kentish coast was an ideal place for entertaining.

The company was friendly rather than social. The greater part of it consisted of people who were in the inner ring of June's acquaintances. Diplomatically too she had asked several men whom she knew to be *persona grata* with her husband. The Bergeracs had been reluctantly obliged to refuse, but the bird-like little Viscount (late Crayshaw) and his wife had, unwittingly of course, filled their places. Also, with a fine sense of humour, June had brought down Lady Frowle, now in half-mourning for the dear late Sir Septimus (defunct, alas, of his appendix !); and the volatile Maisie, who had developed strikingly since her mother had made her put her hair up in view of the chance she might soon get the child off her hands.

Lastly, and with a subtle semblance of admirable stage management, arrived the Comte de Louvre at a moment when his appearance should be seen by everyone.

One recognised with a shock the vast difference that his accident had made in him. Sleek and cat-like, still he was. But the well-set figure had lost much of its grace, and he limped badly as he walked. In his grey suit, he had the appearance of a well-groomed Persian cat, moving with a jerky glide,

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its back warped by a fall. There were no scars upon the handsome sallow face, with its slightly Roman nose and large brown eyes. But the cheeks were undoubtedly hollowed and pale, and the eyes burned aggressively as if they reflected the restless spirit of a sick-bed. There was a distinct streak of grey in his luxuriant brown hair that was brushed back sleekly, and—to one regarding him closely—there were new and deep lines scored by pain on his forehead and round his eyes.

But he still exercised his old, vivacious manner, and carried himself with his air of almost insolent intimacy, greeting June and her husband with that suave effusiveness of which he was master. Among the company he settled himself down as though it should be inferred that he was the honoured guest without whom the house-party would have been commonplace and flat as ditch-water.

The story of his accident, as told by him, aroused intense interest. He had a vivid style of description, helped by his not ineloquent gestures; and one seemed to see clearly the whole affair, the burning of the wrecked carriages, to hear the shrieking of the dying, to understand grimly the twisted contortions of the living imprisoned in the ignited scrap-heap. . . . He became immensely popular with the women by his modestly mentioned story of how, before he quite lost consciousness himself,

he was able to tell the rescuers of a woman-traveller in his compartment who must be buried alive if they did not leave him and see to her quickly. . . .

He explained that, so severe had been the result to him, he lived only on sufferance, as it were. His heart, he hinted with an eloquent motion of his hand which brought instant sympathy to feminine eyes, was not altogether to be depended upon, *hélas !*

To her host, Maisie Frowle sniffed contemptuous opinion of wide-eyed youth.

"It wasn't ever a proper heart, anyhow!" she said, moving impulsively out on to the terrace, as if the air of the room stifled her on this warm night.

"And what do you know about—hearts, proper or otherwise, Miss Wisdom?" questioned her host, good-humouredly following her and lighting a cigar as he strolled in the pleasant moonlight.

"I know a great deal about hearts."

"So, so?" Her gravity tickled him to a chuckle.

"I am in love," she vouchsafed.

"You don't say so!"

"Now, you're laughing at me!"

"Never!"

"You sounded like it."

"On the contrary. I am quite serious, but very delighted. Does mother know?"

"Of course not. Mothers never do know. Their

business is to be very surprised and say—yes—obediently.”

“ Then I hope mother will be quite obedient.”

“ Of course she will. She wants me to be married, you see. That’s why she made me put my hair up. She thought perhaps you might happen to have asked someone who——”

“ Quite. Well, one or two of the younger fellows here are really awfully nice——”

“ But I am in love—— ! ”

“ Ah, yes ! Of course, of course ! And the lucky man ? ”

“ He’s George.”

“ And who may be—George ? ”

“ A boy I know.”

“ A nice boy, I am sure.”

“ Mother doesn’t know I know him.”

“ Which, I suppose, makes him all the nicer.”

“ But he *is* nice—ever so nice ! ”

“ I am sure. And good-looking.”

“ He has eyes just like—yours, Mr. Dant.”

“ Poor chap ! ”

“ Great—soulful—eyes.”

“ Dear, dear ! That sounds interesting. And plenty of money, I hope ? ”

She threw out a gesture of contempt.

“ None. Not at all. That’s the best of it ! ”

“ The—best—of it ? ”

"Money is the worst enemy Love has!" came of her young wisdom.

"I seem to remember you telling me something like that before. Wasn't it your father's typist——?"

"Fancy you remembering that! And it proved true in her case. Just after father died her boy came into ever so much money, and now—she's married!"

"Which rather goes to prove, doesn't it, that it is the lack of money, rather than money itself, which is so unkind to Love?"

She looked up at him sharply out of troubled eyes.

"That's one way of looking at it! I never thought of it quite in that way before. Now, George——"

"I don't think that mother will quite like George," he suggested with a half-amused earnestness. "I'm afraid she won't be altogether as—obedient as you would like if he hasn't any money at all——"

"He is going to get some!"

"Ah! George is a genius——"

"You are laughing at him!"

"On my honour——!"

"George is quite young. He is looking for money——"

"I sympathise with him. I began looking for money when I was young."

“ Some day George might become as rich as you. If he could get a good start. He has only just left college, you see. And he is—in love with me. That will help him a lot. It’s so nice his not having any money when he started being in love with me, you see——”

“ Quite. But, before you say anything to mother, I should wait till George is getting along well——”

“ He is going to London next week to see men about something——”

“ Supposing,” he said to her on a sudden note of inspiration, “ supposing he comes to see—me—about something ? ”

She stared up at him for a moment in bewilderment.

“ Do you mean that ? ”

“ I think I could do with somebody who would be a sort of private secretary——”

“ Here ? And at your house in London ? ”

“ That was my idea.”

“ And you and—June would ask me to stay with you sometimes, so that I should see——”

“ If you would promise to be very—discreet, Miss Innocence, perhaps now and again——”

“ You dear ! You dear ! ” she flung at him, her excited face hidden against his coat-sleeve ; and suddenly looked up at him with a profound seriousness almost bordering on tenderness. |

"And to think that once I did not like you—nearly hated you! That was because mother said you practically bought June, you know——"

He looked quickly away from her big, grave eyes; and studied the cold, cynical face of the moon, that old chaperon of Love that has only eyes to see, but no ears to hear, and no tongue to betray confidences.

"Did she?" he barked curtly.

Maisie stroked his arm with her lithe fingers.

"I ought not to have—said that!"

"Perhaps it was true?"

"I did think it was. But, of course, I don't now. Anybody can see it isn't true. And I'm—very young and can't understand much, can I? But I know you're good—good—the best man in the world—next to George!"

She had one of his hands in hers, kissing it in her girlish enthusiasm.

"Your hand is just like George's!" she said, holding it by force as he tried to draw it away. "A strong, good hand. I think you can tell people—what they are and whether they are nice or not—by their hands, don't you? Yours——"

"Never mind mine, Miss Wisdom!" he laughed. "Keep all your flattery for this George of yours——"

And here, having unconsciously returned to the

open windows from which they had started their walk on the terrace, they were greeted by shouts of laughter.

“What’s happening?” exclaimed Maisie, bubbling with curiosity and entirely for the moment forgetting her George.

“Somebody’s telling fortunes!” she whispered excitedly, and hurried into the room to where a crowd of people clustered round the Comte de Louvre.

“Him!” she sniffed with a contempt as fine as her grammar was poor.

But she held out her hand nevertheless when she had caught the Comte’s eye.

“But I am not good,” he said, stroking it gently, no doubt because it was quite a nice little hand to the touch. “I am not good at reading the hands of women. And I have read already so many of these dear ladies that—if I might be allowed to try—one of you gentlemen—my friend, Monsieur Dant——”

“By all means! I didn’t know you went in for this sort of thing, de Louvre?”

The Comte laughed softly.

“It was something just—amusing—with which I whiled away the tedious hours of a sick-bed,” he said. “The nurse—a dear soul—knew something of it, and gave me some lessons. It is a science

really very interesting all the same. With imagination you will find you can read quite easily the character of the person, something of his future, perhaps—a correct guess of his past. Just as you may like to believe! You just take—the right palm first, if you please, Dant——”

The Comte's eyes watched the slowly opening hand.

“Ah!” he murmured on his exaggerated note of mystic wisdom. “Here, in this palm for instance, I see—a lot of money——”

And his finger tapped a curious little formation of blue lines in the flesh, almost fern-like in pattern——

XVI

CARDS, BLACK AND RED

It was a little over a week later that the Comte strolled, with his noticeable limp, into the London office of James Dant.

You might have noticed about the bustling rabbit-warren of rooms an atmosphere of hauteur and self-importance. For to-day, it should be mentioned, the head of the firm had been elevated to knighthood. The morning papers had contained, and now the evening sheets were supplementing, eulogistic references to the great financial genius, in the dark by-ways of whose stride to fame a great anti-British combine had been exposed and smashed. You might have noticed some of the clerks poring over these with natural pride. All day countless messages of congratulation had been arriving by way of telegram, telephone, and personal call. Stereotyped answers to a large number of these were being despatched with the diligent help of the office boys. It would have been amusing to study the ingenuous subterfuges by which the various members of the staff made opportunity for the

chief's new title, Sir James, to trip effectively over their tongues.

A cynical smile floated over the thin lips of the Comte, as he was presently informed with a grand air that Sir James would be pleased to see him for a moment.

He limped into the big room of the financier with the assistance of his gold-headed malacca cane.

"Hullo!" he laughed on his note of flippantly impertinent familiarity with which you could not exactly quarrel even though it rather grated on your nerves. "And how is—Sir James?"

"Very busy," laughed the other, looking up from the papers that littered his desk. "What——" he waved an invitation to occupy the comfortable leather chair near a revolving bookcase.

"I thought you were in France?" he added. "We were sorry you had to cut short your stay with us so suddenly. You were scarcely more than a few hours with us——"

"I have only this morning returned from Paris," purred the Comte, lounging languidly in the great leather chair. "It is pleasant there just now in this nice spring weather which is almost like summer, even—yes, even in the rue Paradise it is—quite pleasant——"

He sat with the sunlight from the windows

falling full on his face, which bore the most amiable of smiles. He could not, of course, see with any clearness what expression played on the face opposite him, for it was in deep shadow.

"There has been a fire in the rue Paradise," he continued. "You would scarcely recognise again the place now that they have rebuilt——"

"I am afraid, de Louvre, you must be making a mistake," came the cold suggestion from the shadowed mouth. "I have not——"

"You have, at any rate, a cheque-book," flashed the Comte with his cold smile, and leaning forward suddenly to tap the desk with commanding finger. "And I"—he leaned back as suddenly in his chair, with outspread palms fluttering eloquently—"I am deucedly hard up."

The other laughed.

"Oh! You want me to oblige you with a loan?"

"A payment of—shall we say?—twenty thousand pounds to—begin with?"

"A payment—did you say?"

"For my silence."

The hand of the other swept slowly across the surface of the desk, as if blindly seeking support of it for an instant.

"My dear de Louvre!" he said sharply. "Either your illness, or the warm weather, or the two combined must surely have affected your usual——"

The palm of the hand was turned upwards involuntarily in a gesture expressive of inability to find the precise word. The fingers of the Comte flashed out and fastened upon the palm, upon which were clearly to be seen in the bright afternoon sunlight those blue lines in the flesh, almost fern-like in design.

“ I have brought with me from Paris a signed affidavit concerning a certain Monsieur Johns, late of *numéro treize* of the rue Paradise, Paris,” he purred, “ upon whose hand are these marks, imprinted upon it by the god Jupiter during one stormy afternoon in the—Bois Fontaine, was it not ? ”

The other made no motion of assent or denial. Of his shadowed face, the Comte could only see the eyes, regarding him with a lambent flame which might have meant anything.

“ And I have other affidavits,” he continued softly, “ which, taken one with another, serve to build up a very pretty story. There are two people in this story, twin brothers. Like the sons of—was it not Zebedee ?—they are called James and John. One died, but has risen from the dead. The other is still alive although he really is dead. It is a story for the Grand Guignol——”

“ My dear de Louvre ! I really am much too busy——”

The Comte intercepted the hand which was held out towards the electric bell on the desk.

"I think," he persisted amiably, "you have—bluffed beautifully—till now. But now, if I may venture to suggest it, is no time for more bluff. We talk business. We take out our cheque-book, and we—write—twenty thousand pounds——"

His fingers, so slender and well manicured, seemed to be writing the figures in the air with a flourish.

"And, meanwhile, I congratulate you, Mister John Dant, otherwise Monsieur Johns, otherwise—Sir James—*la, la!* A colossal, a stupendous bluff, a very flash of genius——!" he laughed.

The other moved slowly in his chair, and leaned forward with his elbows on the desk, his chin supported by two clenched fists.

"Evidently, de Louvre, you have some bee in your bonnet," he said with almost cumbersome diction, and rapped out a sharp command: "Explain yourself, please."

The Comte drew from his pocket a blue document of more or less legal appearance.

"It is," he said, "a copy only. The affidavit itself is—in safe keeping. It is, as you will see, in the nature of a death-bed statement—my agents came very near to losing all hope of getting it—made by Silas J. Banker, sharebroker of New York.

You will read from it, by making a comparison of the dates, that at the time you were at the château Louvre the real James Dant, known personally to the man Banker, was actually engaged with him privately in New York in—business regarding oil shares——!”

The other held the document open before him and was reading it with slow thoroughness. The Comte watched him from under all but closed eyelids with his sardonic smile.

“Here,” he said presently, and throwing more documents carelessly upon the desk, “here are copies of other exhibits in the great exposition of bluff. A statement by the chauffeur who drove my friend Dant from the Superbe to the rue Paradise, and his—shall we say understudy?—back again. The statement of a passenger on the *President Faure* who slept in the same cabin as a man name Johns and overheard his companion talking in his sleep. A statement by a rescued sailor from the *Guillaume Tell* to the effect that, as the liner was sinking, the passenger shipped as Mr. Johns was madly offering thousands of pounds to anyone who would save him, and swearing madly that he was not a poor man, not Johns at all, but a famous millionaire——!”

Slowly and methodically the other picked up and examined each of the documents in turn,

without even looking at the Comte. Presently, as he finished the last, he folded them all up afresh and piled them each on top of the other.

"You seem to have prepared a—fairly complete case, de Louvre," he said on a coldly judicial note.

"You admit it then ! "

"I admit nothing."

"But you do not deny it ! "

"Neither do I deny anything."

The Comte shrugged his shoulders amiably.

"Between ourselves, of course ! To be quite candid, at this moment I admire you intensely. I cannot too much congratulate you. It must have needed a colossal nerve to carry through this thing—it is almost inconceivable until you recognise that it has happened, the results achieved—fortune bigger than ever—rank—*nom d'un nom* ! This joke of being—Sir James—— ! "

His soft laugh of derision dwindled to a sudden silence. The other sat, hunched up at the table, his face a mere blurr of shadow. The Comte leaned forward with an impatient gesture.

"And now, with regard to this cheque for twenty thousand pounds—to begin——"

"Only—to begin ? " murmured the other. " And, pray, what do you propose—to follow ? "

"You will, of course, disappear. That you will

know very well how to do artistically from past experience!" laughed the Comte. "Certainly, you may take with you some reasonable portion of the fortune you have made. It would but be fair. And the rest, left by will for—the widow——

"Whom I shall hope presently to—relieve of her widowhood," he added with a self-complacent smirk.

The other rose to his feet. It was a slow movement, indicative of intense latent force.

"You are a sick man, de Louvre," he said quietly, but with the dangerous hoarseness of slowly rising anger. "You are a sick man, for which you may thank your lucky stars."

"By which you mean——?"

"Shall I ring, or can you find your own way out?"

The Comte was standing now too upon his feet.

"You—you still intend to go on—bluffing?" he snarled, suddenly vicious.

"I say again: be thankful you are a sick man, and—shall I ring?"

The Comte flung out a warning hand.

"If you ring, you know what will happen?"

"What, pray?"

"I shall go straight out and expose the greatest swindle ever known. What do you think? I shall tell the world that this is not James Dant,

who is sitting in here, but—a thief, a vagabond——”

“And you imagine that the world will believe you?”

The Comte snatched up from the desk the pile of documents and flourished them aggressively under the face of the other.

“This clear evidence——!” he blared.

“Wasted trouble and expense!”

“We shall see!”

“I think not. I think you will go away and forget entirely this—curious story, de Louvre. Because, if you do not——”

“If I do not——?”

“Do you insist on my telling you?”

“Proceed with your—bluff!” lashed the Comte scornfully.

The hand of the other went up and fumbled for a moment at the lower part of his shadowed mouth. Then, dropped; and he laughed in a light inconsequent way.

“Perhaps it would be as well that we understood each other,” he said softly and on quite a good-humoured note. “I—think the best way to begin will be for me to say at once that, between ourselves and within the security of these four walls, I—do not deny the—exactness of your surmise as to my real identity. I am, as you say, not James Dant,

but that late lamented gentleman's twin brother. The formidable array of evidence which you have collected here, apparently at much trouble and expense, is therefore quite correct in substance. I am—I have for many months now been—here under entirely false pretences. I came here, I might mention, altogether at my brother's wish——”

Without any undue waste of words he sketched out the crude outlines of the history of that night in the rue Paradise.

“ You see, de Louvre,” he continued. “ I am quite candid with you. I tell you everything frankly. It is best that we should be open with each other. Equally, we should end by being unanimous in our decision that this—curious story should never leave the safe confidence of these four walls. This—formidable array of evidence which you have knitted together, for instance. We must be quite in agreement about it. Myself, I doubt very much whether any Bench of Justice would really regard it as sufficient proof of your case to warrant a judgment adverse to me. It is, like all knitted things, holed, and one of the biggest holes in it has unfortunately let the real James Dant through it into the sea, where he is beyond possible call of any coroner's exhumation order. Still, though I think it highly improbable, your knitted

thing might manage to exclude the draughts of unbelief. It might warm the world to credence. It would certainly cause a sensation. And it must not be permitted to do any such thing. The—curious story must remain untold.”

“My terms——” snapped the Comte impatiently.

“Ah! Of course! You were very candid about them. They were evidently carefully thought out. They represent a perfected refinement of blackmail.”

The Comte’s eyes flashed.

“For you—a forger—a thief—to talk of——”

“Blackmail is a thing I have never yet attempted,” murmured the other blandly. “I do not like the sound of it. Only, with very great regret I find myself forced to adopt it in this instance. I am sorry. If it were merely a matter concerning myself and—what money there is in the bank to my credit—I should be disposed to congratulate you on your successful discovery. And—I might have agreed to assist you in those—er—financial embarrassments of which you spoke. But, unfortunately, this affair has interwoven with it the reputation and peace of mind of a woman.”

“It will be the happiest hour for June——” sneered the Comte; but the sudden crash of a fist on the desk startled his sentence to an abrupt end.

"You forget yourself, de Louvre."

The Comte shrugged his shoulders.

"By a matter of a few weeks only," he leered.

"Pleasant anticipation is——"

"Sometimes converted into disagreeable realisation," murmured the other. "For instance, you came here quite under the impression that your trump card, de Louvre, was not to be beaten, that the black dots of blackmail were bound to win the trick. But I have a card up my sleeve which ought to clear the pool. A card, no doubt, quite overlooked by you. It is a card with red dots upon it. Dots of the colour of—blood."

The hand of the Comte dropped suddenly to the desk, there to support him as he leaned forward with a quick, involuntary little movement. The sound of his lame leg on the carpet was a sharp shuffle.

"I am sorry to be obliged to mention such a disagreeable topic," murmured the other, turning suddenly round and staring thoughtfully through the window.

"What do you mean?"

"A little over twelve months ago a woman was found murdered—of all places in the world—in the rue Paradise," he said slowly.

"What has that to do with——?"

"You?" The other looked round with a thinly

veiled amusement at the strident note in the Comte's voice. "So far as the world knows—nothing. Just as the world does not know that I do not happen to be the real James Dant. And, if you will be advised by me, the world will retain its ignorance on—both subjects."

"More—bluff?" laughed the Comte hoarsely, but with an obvious unrest at the back of his blazing eyes.

The other walked back from the window to the desk.

"No," he said. "Not bluff, this time; nor yet a knitted thing through the holes of which any criminal could escape the dock and—aftermath. That murder of the girl in the rue Paradise was a crime, to all appearances, without any clue to evidence whatever. A poor girl murdered—it seemed to be the only feasible motif—out of jealousy. You can guess what sort of a lover a girl living in such a place might have been expected to boast. A down-at-heel fellow, vagabond very likely, maybe inclined to criminality——"

"What have I to do with murdered women and their down-at-heel lovers?" snapped the Comte, suddenly livid with fury.

The other toyed, smiling amiably, with a paper-cutter, bending the steel blade daintily between finger and thumb.

“ It was only that the papers suggested a down-at-heel lover for the poor creature,” he said slowly. “ You know what imagination the papers have, what colouring, what infinite wisdom. I often think that Ananias must have been the first of all editors——”

“ This absurd nonsense ! ” choked the Comte, rapping the desk with a shaking hand. “ This red herring drawn across the trail of——”

“ Blood ? ” questioned the other cheerfully. “ Yes, it was quite a red herring, that suggestion of the down-at-heel lover, de Louvre. You would in the ordinary way, no doubt, have been furious if such a suggestion should have been made of so spruce a gentleman as yourself, would you not ? ”

For a moment of intense silence the Comte stood, swaying to and fro stupidly.

“ Do you mean to suggest—— ? ” he whispered faintly.

“ I know,” flashed the other from between suddenly stern lips. He tapped the desk softly with the point of the paper-cutter as he talked.

“ I was there at the time. At least, I was in the outer of the poor girl’s two rooms which had only an open door between them. It was, if you will remember, a foggy night. (Just such another foggy night as that on which my late lamented brother

came to visit me in my own poor quarters, which happen to be on that same floor.) In those days, I regret to say, I looked more often and deeply than was wise into the wine which was red. I was—not sober. It is stupid to let yourself be not quite sober in a fog. I—slightly misled by my erring footsteps—entered the outer room of that poor girl. As I have said, the door leading into the inner, or bedroom, was open. It was like walking into a stall seat at a theatre rather late. Perhaps I should say—after the drama is all but over. I could see that the poor girl was quite dead. You were—I watched you with, I admit, curious feelings almost of admiration, putting those artistic touches to the crime which have made it—historic——”

In the livid face of the Comte his eyes blazed self-confessed fear, which his tongue lashed to contradict.

“Lies ! Lies !” he choked. “It was you——”

“It was I who, stumbling out again in a devil of a hurry, frightened you away. From my window I heard you climbing down that fire-ladder which, though rather perilous I should imagine, evaded the lynx eyes of the concierge. . . . I was by that time breathing more freely. You see, I could have done little good by interfering. The poor girl was dead. To have mixed myself up in the business would very likely have involved me in an accusation

of having committed the crime, particularly as I was known to be friendly with the poor creature. So friendly, indeed, that certain letters—you remember that, at the public enquiry, reference was made to a bundle of missing letters which might—in fact would—have involved the culprit?—those letters had been handed by her *to me* only on the morning of that tragic day! It would have been awkward, indeed, if I had been arrested on suspicion and those letters had been found in my room, eh, de Louvre?"

He had sunk, limp and shaking, into the chair, all his air of insolent familiarity gone, this Comte de Louvre.

"They are still wondering who could have committed that interesting murder in the rue Paradise," continued the other in his soft monotone of gentle mockery. "And those mysterious letters, which, by the way, I never read till I sent for them when I had them stored a few weeks ago—they would like to have them placed in their hands. For the letters alone tell the truth. And they——" he stretched out a languid hand to one of the drawers of his desk, from which he brought out a sheaf of papers.

"Here——" he murmured, and laughed softly as the Comte, with a swift forward plunge, snatched them from his hand.

"Copies only, my dear de Louvre," he laughed

dryly. "The originals are, of course, in a safe place. But——"

He leaned across the desk towards the other who sat hunched up in his chair, staring wild-eyed at the papers in his hand.

"If you do not hand me over within twenty-four hours from now, de Louvre, those tell-tale affidavits of yours in regard to this—curious story concerning my brother and myself, and those original letters, I go straight to the French police, and you to—madame guillotine——!"

"No, no!" whispered the Comte hoarsely, waving frantic hands. "You shall have them! To-morrow without fail you shall have them! And you will give me those letters——?"

"By no means."

"But?"

"They shall remain with me as—surety for your silence, my dear de Louvre——"

"In the name of God——!"

The other laid his hand smartly on the electric bell in front of him on the desk.

"It is not with God that your interest lies, my dear de Louvre," he said sadly. "But with the devil where all your investments appear to be accumulating in value."

The face of Burke appeared in the open doorway.

“ Yes, Sir James ? ”

“ Please have the Comte shown to his car.”

The Comte limped to the door, waving an adieu of admirably simulated cordiality.

“ You shall have those papers by the first post in the morning—Sir James,” he said.

XVII

BROODING STORM

SIR JAMES—obsequiously regarded by his staff—left his office within a very few moments of the departure of the Comte.

He did so with a smiling face and with a buoyant carriage which had been noticeably missing in him of late. On his way, he stopped a cadaverous young clerk, whose stooping figure waited against the corridor wall for him to pass.

“ Mr. Burke mentioned to me to-day that you were in anxiety about your wife, Wilson ? ” he said.

The clerk fumbled with nervous hands.

“ I’m afraid, sir, the one or two mistakes I have let slip through in my work of late have been——”

“ Very naturally. But we can’t afford to keep clerks whose family troubles prey on them so much that their work suffers.”

“ I’m sorry, sir——” The choke in the voice and the pitifully fumbling hands were eloquent of nervous frenzy.

“ So am I, Wilson. Of course, we must put a stop to it——”

"If you could give me another chance, sir——" gulped the clerk.

"Possibly it is your wife who needs a chance most, Wilson. Mr. Burke seemed to hint that it was a case in which a trip to—Interlaken——"

The fumbling hand of the clerk swept outwards in a motion of pathetic impotence.

"The cost, sir——"

"I have instructed the cashier to give you a year's salary, Wilson, at double your present rate, and I have arranged that you should have six months' holiday yourself to take her over and see her well on her way to recovery. I think that should put matters right, don't you think?"

The clerk's cadaverous face went white as death.

"I—I can't ever thank you, sir——"

"Thanks are really due from me to you, Wilson. You put in very fine work a few months ago when the firm was in—rather a bad way. I am not forgetful. So we'll—just shake hands, and—good luck to you!"

He left the clerk, still clinging to the corridor wall and gaping. The story, related in the office, produced first a murmur of congratulation, and then an almost uncanny silence. Which silence was presently broken by a philosophic keeper of huge ledgers on his high stool in a gloomy corner.

"It shows you that there's good even in the worst of men," he said grimly. "If anybody had

told me six months ago that the boss was capable of doing a kind action, I should have politely said to him——”

In his nervous excitement he blotted his ledger, and exclaimed fiercely : “ Rats ! ”

Interlaken, Sir James had suggested.

He was thinking of Interlaken whilst his car whirled him through the south-eastern suburbs of London, and thence presently into the green lanes of Kent.

He was in mood for Interlaken to-night. He was in mood for the rue Paradise, for that matter, to-night. He was in mood for anything which spelled freedom from care, the simple happiness of a mind easily satisfied. He was much in that mood which had tempted him to this quixotic adventure, now become drama very fierce and tense, and presently to become—he had no idea what ! A very devil of a mood !

Buoyant at one moment, terribly depressed at the next : intensely amused, gloomily despondent : cutely weaving plans, sick to death of the whole thing : gathering pluck in a formidable array, and then turning coward. No one mood at all, but many moods that were like a basket teeming with vipers twisting in and out of each other, spitting venom.

He had crumpled up the Comte. There was nothing to be boastful of in that. On the contrary, his artistic mind condemned the opportunity and method of its doing as savouring too much of sheer melodrama. He would have preferred to have dangled his bait longer under the Comte's eyes. He would have been disposed now to have played with him less arbitrarily, led him on to a false impression that he feared him, let him believe that he had been taken by surprise, blustered and bluffed a trifle longer. That card up his sleeve—red-dotted with the blood of the murdered girl in the rue Paradise—was one which it had been distasteful to him to use. From the first moment he had recognised in de Louvre the central figure of that mad, fog-bound glimpse of horror, he had tried to put the thought from his mind. It had been, in fact, entirely necessary that he should do so.

To have blurted out that knowledge would have been at once a clear proof that he was not James Dant.

And even now, but for one important factor in the drama, he would not have used that card. If it had just been a question of de Louvre and himself, a matter of blackmail, what would it have mattered? This amazing adventure had, as concerned himself and his brother only, no motif for any further prolongation. Really, it had ended when the *Guillaume*

Tell had emptied his late lamented brother into the sea. From the moment that he had been assured of that, he could have found easy opportunity to put up the shutters over the shop of James Dant. He could either have paid the Comte to hold his tongue, or let him talk. The latter would have resulted in one of the finest sensations the world had ever known.

But the dominating factor in the drama was the reputation of June.

And more, as he recognised to himself, than her reputation. There was also that which held the balance between his moods, dipping them first this way and then that, as he seemed to read her eyes and interpret the tone of her voice.

What would she think of him if she knew, when she knew ?

It mattered very much to him what she thought. Because she was life and hope and very God to him.

She was going to know. He was on his way now to tell her.

He had come out from the crumpling up of de Louvre with a smiling face and a buoyant carriage and in his very devil of a mood, just as he had been in those days of the rue Paradise, cheerfully resolved to end now once and for all this job of a born rascal, a consummate hypocrite, a rogue adventurer. . . . The job had lasted quite long enough. So much he

had dimly recognised for long past. It had needed only the flash of the sword in de Louvre's scabbard to jolt him from the sheer lethargy of his temperament to swift action. And, with the crumpling up of de Louvre, the moment was finely opportune. No better could offer. At his hour of complete immunity from discovery, fresh from his fight for the safe shielding of her honour, he would go to her and make voluntary confession. . . .

It was curious how that at this moment, carried swiftly through an orgy of green leaf and hedge that was all ablaze with a ruddy afternoon sun soon to sink in the west, he suffered an intense, a terrible craving for—absinthe!

The smell of the cafés of Paris was in his nostrils, the opalescent shimmer of the pearly drug, sugared and ready to be sipped from its gleaming glass, slender-stemmed and brittle, seemed to be visioned before his eyes and craved of his body. The flavour of it rose in his mouth which was dry-lipped. . . . He could see himself hunched at the table in the café, his head slowly sinking upon his crossed arms, sleeping. . . . He knew himself to be dreaming. . . . A wonderful, pulse-throbbing dreaming, amazingly sweet, flesh-tinted as if set in a framework of loveliest houris and angel children. . . .

He jerked himself free of the cushioned comfort

of his car, and let the wind whistle on his face. He had been fondly imaging that the craving for absinthe had been cured in him. Only he knew at what terrible cost. . . .

He began to think of June. And of where he had last let absinthe touch his lips—Interlaken. He had flung it from him, at Interlaken, finally, fiercely. . . . At this moment he fancied he could hear the crash of the glass as he flung it from his window against a rocky hillside. And, in the next room to his, the footsteps of June very softly moving about restlessly. . . .

He had flung away one drug for another, thrown out one love to give birth to another, at Interlaken.

And Interlaken was a viper in his basket of moods.

Interlaken made him afraid of the task before him. It had been the one flaw in his finely meshed net of diplomacy. It ought never to have happened. Still less should have been allowed the days that followed, those days of unbending from the stern aloofness of the real James Dant, those days of intimacy, pleasant philandering, confidences of a man and woman mutually attracted and allowed to run gentle riot of philandering.

It was true, he had done much since then to counter-balance their effect. Had he not deliberately lied to her to bluff her into a belief that those days

were merely *pour passer le temps* ? He believed that, for that matter, he had succeeded. To all appearances, and looking back over the last week, matters now stood much where they had stood on that first night in Paris when he had stepped into his brother's shoes.

But appearance is the blind that suffers likelihood to lead the blind into the ditch. At the back of his mind he felt that Interlaken and the days that followed could not be wiped out by any lie. They were the cradle and the wrappings and the silken coverlet of Love.

And this thing that he must stride in and tell her was a mailed fist to bruise and batter the sweet body of Love, while still it could not kill Love's soul. . . .

The craving for absinthe burned at the roof of his mouth. The craving for absinthe and the forgetfulness of wonderful, pulse-throbbing dreaming. . . .

As his car ran smoothly downhill into the dip on the coast-line which curved here in bay form outwards towards the headland upon which the turrets of old Brazenhurst peeped above tree-tops, he dipped once more into his basket of moods and fished out dubious inspiration. Why tell her at all ? Why not take full advantage of his complete immunity from discovery ? Why not reap to its

full the harvest which he had sown on the stony ground his brother had ploughed? Why not seize his reward for all this toil, these risks? Why not shatter that lie and show her that he cared—ah, cared to the very life and breath of him, that he worshipped her——?

He looked out, fascinated, at the green-grey shimmer of sea, sun-splashed, foam-flecked. He knew at sight that it was a sea which promised with night to grow more and more angry. A note of brooding storm rang already in the sullen boom of it. Even now, its vanguard surf lashed the chalk cliffs of the cove below Brazenhurst with spiteful zest.

The sea had swallowed the real James Dant, and there was no one to prove it. The sea would keep its secret, seemed to be dinning its promise into his ears with its monotonous mutter. . . .

The car swung up the steep short hill and turned into the park gates, whilst he fought with temptation. It took some fighting. Great drops of perspiration sparkled on his forehead in the flashing rays of the setting sun as the car twisted in its silent rush along the curved drive to the front porch, where it drew up upon a scene of obvious excitement. An agitated footman waved to someone in the hall, and a white-faced butler came at an awkward run, pudgy hands frantically fluttering.

"Lady Dant, sir——!" he panted, his mouth twisted with nervous fright.

"Is she ill?" He sprang briskly up the steps to find a small knot of pallid servants huddled in the hall and staring at him, awestruck. He felt suddenly chilled and cold.

"Is her Ladyship—ill?" he repeated sharply of the butler.

"She's—God help you, sir—I fear she's drowned!"

"Now——?"

Then Watson, coming suddenly from the library door beyond which a telephone bell had been jangling, thrust his way forward.

"Her ladyship took the little sailing-boat out for a trip during the late afternoon, sir; since which she hasn't been seen. And Merton—the under-keeper, sir—'as found the boat drifting, upside down, in the cove——"

"But, surely, she was not—alone? The Viscount——"

"'Is lordship and the Viscountess—the honly remaining guests—left sudden-like immediate after lunch, Sir James. And 'er ladyship, being alone, seemed to fancy a sail. Several times this week she 'as been out alone, sir——"

"How long ago is it since the boat was found?"

"Maybe 'alf an 'our, sir."

“ And—has any search been made ? ”

“ We were just collecting a few of the men-servants, Sir James, whilst I rang up the coast-guards——”

At the front door he swung round on his heel white-lipped and stern.

“ Some of you men follow me. See that the women get hot blankets ready, and—Watson—bring brandy——”

XVIII

SEAWEED

HE found her eventually, drenched and unconscious, upon a chalky ledge in the cliff to which she must have climbed with the last desperate spasms of expiring strength.

Only with difficulty he reached her himself and managed, at imminent risk of falling with her into the black abyss of boiling sea, to carry her back safely to the broader cliff path from which he had seen the white glimmer of her dress in the darkness. Away, round the curve of the little bay, he could see the dancing lights of the lanterns carried by the search party. But the wind that whistled across the face of the cliff, and the roar of the sea at its base, prevented his hoarse shout from reaching them.

So he climbed, foot by foot and wind-tossed as he groped his way blindly, till at last he came to the top. And, as he climbed, he poured into the soft cold ear of the frail helpless body in his arms, warm passionate endearments, frenzied hopes, burning phrases of fear and love.

“Little heart of mine, you’re not dead? The

good God wouldn't have it. . . . He knows I love you. . . . He knows I want you. That's why He let me find you. . . . You're not dead, little rose, little flower all lovely? In the name of Heaven you're not dead? They don't want more angels in Heaven yet, while I want you like a starving man crying for bread. . . . Has the sea taken you before I could tell you, my dearest dear? The cruel sea, my beautiful love. It gave you to me. . . . It shan't take you from me, dear soft thing. . . . God is greater than the sea. . . . He doesn't want you to die. . . . He made us for each other, sweetheart. . . ."

The light of a lantern flashed athwart his path as he reached the crest of the cliff. It was carried by Watson.

"Thank Gawd, sir!" he breathed piously, holding the light aloft. "Found and—alive, sir——!"

For at that moment, under the glare of the light, big violet eyes opened slowly in the white, sea-damped face, and looked softly up in the eyes of the man who carried her.

"James," she whispered, and seemed to drop back into unconsciousness. . . . He had her wrapped, quickly as possible, in blankets which a stable-boy had ready, and hurried her to the house.

The eminent county practitioner from the neighbourhood, who kindly drove over in his car on a personal telephone call from Sir James, had departed with an air which seemed to indicate that, personally, he considered his time had been rather wasted.

“No danger whatever, my dear Sir James!” had been his cheerful verdict. “The ordinary precautions were so well taken, I could see, without any delay. And I do not imagine, from what I can gather of her, that your good lady was really in the water for any length of time. I should be inclined to think—she is a good swimmer, is she not?—that the immersion was less of a shock to her, or indeed harmful, than the—physical exertion pulling herself ashore, and—to be sure—the natural alarm from which she would suffer in her unenviable situation. But—well, well! As things turned out—your fortunate arrival so speedily upon the scene was—very fortunate! A good night’s sleep will do her all the good in the world. It is really all she needs. She is naughty enough to insist that she is dreadfully awake and—quite well. And so she is! Of course, she is! Still—sleep is a fine tonic. I find it so! I find it so——”

And he was driven away in his electrically lit brougham, profoundly yawning.

Watson, bringing decanters and glasses on a

salver to the library later, found his master pacing the carpet.

He was told brusquely that nothing more would be wanted to-night, and that he was to instruct the servants to get to bed as soon as possible, and have the house kept quiet.

As he backed out of the room in his stately way, his shrewd eyes noted the shaking hand which tinkled the decanter against the glass-edge till it made a sound as of a little electric bell in the distance.

"Suffering more from shock is Sir James than milady, according to accounts," he informed the servants' hall confidentially. "'Is face is that white and uncanny-looking——"

It was white as death, that face ; death which its owner professed to regard as a kindly thing to be greeted with open arms rather than dreaded ; death which he had feared would cut her off in all her loveliness.

He trembled like a child. He felt small and weak as a child before this night's whirlwind of events.

They had shown him once and for all what she was to him.

The stimulant to which he helped himself, with a prodigal hand that seemed as though it refused to regain its habitual steadiness, leaped like fire in his

veins and warmed him. It, and the passion that throbbed in his pulses, filled him with a glow. A glow that demanded, defied, excused, terribly tempted. . . .

The hour for telling her the truth—with a comparatively easy conscience—had slipped away beyond recall. It would have been an hour of intense torment, an hour to be greatly dreaded; but, stepping from his car that evening, he had been prepared to meet it.

And the sea, for the second time in this strange, quixotic drama, had intervened. Just as before, in swallowing up the real James Dant, it had involved his understudy in financial difficulties to meet which for June's sake he had permitted himself to carry on the deception longer than he had intended, so now this second time its rude thrust into the story had swept him from his feet, at a moment when they were about to carry him safely towards his recognised duty.

For what strength of call has duty upon a man's heart, when he kneels by the bed of a beautiful woman, who clings to him and kisses him and lavishes tenderest endearments on him? What can he do against the lure of soft white arms that hold him fast, red lips that are thrust, warm and yielding, against his sterner ones, a lovely body that is pressed close to him, a voice that falters

Love, unashamed, all-sweeping, all-demanding, all-yielding ?

Here in this gloomy library, lit only by the green-shaded lamp on the writing-table at which he sits, he can picture again vividly that scene in her dainty bedroom.

She lay trembling in his arms, would not let them slacken for an instant in their embrace. And hers held him too, as if they feared to be torn from their caressing hold on his body. Her head lay on his shoulder, copper-gold hair in its glinting masses covering him with a glorious silken veil, her lovely face, pallid after the last hour's terrible happenings, lifted so close to his that the scent of her, the warm breath from her pale mouth intoxicated, ravished him.

"We needn't pretend any longer," she whispered weakly. "I know now that you love me. When I was in your arms. . . . Little flower all lovely, and sweetheart, you called me. . . . You wouldn't have said that if you didn't love me, would you ?"

"No, no !" he murmured, hoping with every moment that the doctor would arrive and end this torment against which every fibre in him weakened and must soon give way utterly.

"Say that you love me," she urged, with her lips at his ear. "You have never said it—to me—yet. And, if I died without hearing you say it——"

"I love you," he muttered hoarsely. "God knows, I love you, worship you——"

Her lips forced his to a wild moment of wordless bliss. He took no shame to himself. For all he knew she might die. . . .

And she laughed up at him, a soft music of very ecstasy.

"I shan't die now, dear husband. How could I? You love me. Life is only beginning. We are going to be—so happy. We will have our real honeymoon. . . . So much time we have wasted—and all my fault! I must have been mad; but I didn't know you—cared. And now I know—you shall see! I am yours—all yours, darling. Come to me to-night——"

He held her trembling body close to him, passion-swayed, and then tried to lay her back on the lacy pillows.

"But you must not excite yourself so, dear heart," he murmured soothingly. "You are still weak. When the doctor comes he will tell you that you must lie still and try to sleep——"

"Sleep?" she cooed, forcing to hers his face held in her white, caressing hands, and kissing him feverishly. "I will sleep when you come to me, dear love. I will sleep—in Heaven—in your arms, close—for always—really your wife—at last——"

And here the doctor's arrival was foreshadowed by the discreet housekeeper from the doorway of the darkened room.

"Come to me—soon!" she whispered, kissing him before he went.

Behind him in the gloomy library, lit only by the small green-shaded lamp on his table, wind whistled mockingly through an open window, which he had flung wide so that the night air might drift in and cool the stifling atmosphere of this room in the shadows of which he seemed to see always that exquisite picture of her, snuggled among her pillows and following him with her big violet eyes that were a revelation of her new-found happiness, of her hopes, of her passionate desires. . . .

He stretched out his shaking hand suddenly for the decanter; but as suddenly withdrew it in a movement of furtive shame, realising vividly that this was no moment in which to give way to weakness, or to create a simulated courage with the vicious use of alcohol.

It was a moment for clear-headed action, courageous cleanliness of purpose.

"Come to me—soon!" she had demanded of him, in her innocent spirit of wifely surrender.

The demand was the sharp tinkle of that warning

bell which prepared the stage for the fall of the last curtain in this amazing drama. . . .

It must, of course, fall upon confession.

Confession too long delayed, and now aggravated in its difficulty by that scene upstairs.

He had acknowledged his love for her. He had held her in his arms, taken her kisses. . . . It needed much of courage to confess the truth now. In the necessarily gradual unwinding of the story she would jump at conclusions, imagine motives that had never existed, misinterpret incidents, picture him in her mind as a common blackguard, loathe him. . . . He could see the lovely face of her as she listened. Blank with amazement, at first. Then, incredulity struggling with growing understanding of reality, then—horror, shame, furious rage, utter contempt of him. . . .

He winced at the thought, as under a lash. It was the one unthinkable, unbearable thing. . . . For a long time he crouched at the table with his face hidden in his hands.

The old temptation was hot upon him. Why tell her at all? Why not take in his hands this love which he had brought into existence? There was nobody to snatch it from him. . . .

And, even as he fought this cunning whisper of the Unclean—holding it at bay—sternly stifling it, he turned abruptly in his chair, stared for a

moment at the open window, and sprang to his feet.

The window, outside the radius of the green-shaded light on the table, was buried in shadows. But out of these had come sounds which had startled him. First, as of a boot rasping on stone, then—a sharp little breathless laugh.

At that laugh he snatched up the lamp from the table and stepped forward abruptly, holding it high above his head.

And now the rays of it picked out of the surrounding gloom a man's face, vividly white and aggressive in its sinister smile. He stared at it, incredulous, for an instant, and then—

“James!” he gasped.

“Well—John?”

“You—were not then—drowned—after all?”

“Not quite.”

“Good God!”

“Never mind about God. Let's shut this confounded window. It's cold. I'm sick of cold. If you had been where I have been, stuck away on a foul old whaler in the Arctic—icebound—frozen to death——”

He made a great clatter closing the window fastening, and so neither of them heard the opening of a door at the other side of the room.

“And meantime,” he laughed. “I see from the

papers since I got back to civilisation again that you have been doing yourself well. So I am Sir James now, eh ? ”

“ That is so.”

“ I hope you haven't been wasting my hard-earned money in buying an empty title, John ? ”

The other smiled dryly.

“ No. As a matter of fact, I happened to be comparing your pass-book this morning, James, with its condition when I—stepped into your shoes. The balance credit is somewhere about—say, twice as big.”

“ Good ! Good ! You surprise me. That has been my greatest worry while you were away. I thought, with your dilatory, unbusiness-like character, you would be sure to let things slide——”

“ No. I didn't do that.”

“ Then nothing else matters. I suppose my wife had to be told, though——”

“ She knows nothing,” murmured the other grimly.

“ Good. I suppose she was quite under the impression that you——”

In the light of the green-shaded lamp the two men regarded each other for a moment, motionless, silent, their faces so uncannily, feature for feature and line for line, a reflection each of the other.

" Yes, she has no idea that I am not you, James."

" Excellent. No, really, everything is much the same—exactly the same, in fact—as when I went away."

" That is, more or less, so, James."

" And there is nothing to prevent us from returning to our own names and—belongings—as though nothing had happened ? "

" Nothing whatever. In fact, so soon as I have made you—*au fait*, James, with what has happened in your absence I shall be—intensely relieved to walk out. The last few months have been to me——"

" I'll lay you've been having a good time ! " laughed the other, with a gesture towards the table. " Whiskey—cigars—high living—women, I suppose, especially women. I've often thought of you doing yourself well. What an opportunity I gave you ! It isn't every starving man who has a kind-hearted brother comes along and say—be me, take my money and all I have and—oh, yes, my wife—— ! By the way, I hope you haven't, after your customary habit with pretty women, employed yourself by making love to my wife—— ? "

A moment of tensely hesitant silence was broken sharply by a little full-throated cry of shame and fear from the far end of the room, bringing the two men round abruptly on their heels.

“ Who the dickens—— ? ” snarled the one, his fingers fumbling at his lower lip.

The other brought the lamp with a crash to the table. The green shade of it, tilted sideways by the impact, flung a shaft of yellow light across the room in the direction of the library door. And here, in the open doorway, against which she leaned one white trembling hand, it showed the slender figure of June, pink-robed in nightdress of clinging silk, over which her unbound hair trailed in its glory of an angry sunset.

As the two men stared at her, she came slowly away from the door, her bare feet gleaming white on the thick crimson carpet. In her pale face her eyes were like smouldering fires, passing slowly and understandingly from one to the other of the two faces so exactly alike, from the immaculate dress-suit of the one man to the sea-stained uncouth outfit of the other.

It was to the latter she addressed herself on a hard, metallic note of command :

“ You—are James ? ”

He laughed a pompous correction.

“ Sir James ! ”

“ And—this other person ? ”

With the slightest motion of her proud little head she indicated the immaculately dress-suited figure that stood motionless behind her.

“Your brother-in-law—John. He and I——”

“I have heard quite sufficient to understand—all there is to understand,” she said icily but with a jerky hoarseness accentuating the last words. She seemed to notice the lapse in restraint, and regained command of her voice.

“I think perhaps I have heard all I care to be allowed to hear,” she continued. “He——” Again that movement of the proud head backwards in the direction of the motionless figure in its well-cut black and diamond-studded white shirt front—“he will tell you that I am—not very well. I ought not to have left my room. I am going back. I——”

She turned half-way to the door, and looked back at the man in the sea-stained suit.

“There was a question asked, James, about—love. I have not been troubled in any way with—love. He seems to know—and care—as little about—love—as you or—I.”

And she passed out of the room, closing the door carefully.

PART THE FOURTH.

XIX

BEACHED BOATS

IT was a year later, almost to a day, that a boat was swept by many gleaming paddles coastwards down the tortuous Ogowai, that weed-tangled waterway of the French Congo which empties itself into the sea to the south of Cape Lopez.

The boat beached at a point where the river turns northward before opening its mouth to swallow the salt of the south Atlantic. The point marked an end of that luxuriant tangle of tropical verdure which spreads beside the Ogowai from source almost to mouth, a wonderful interlaced profusion of marvellous Nature, mile upon mile, day's travel upon day's travel. The point marked also the first signs of that other force which is always fighting Nature in Africa—civilisation.

The straggled habitations of Dogao gleamed white and red and black and yellow amid such sun-scorched green as there was beyond the beach.

Dogao, albeit an outpost of civilisation, is no place for the civilised. It is not even named on any civilised map. And, looking at it and around

it, one felt no surprise at that. The white building of a French trading establishment, some half-dozen residences of the unfortunate whites who were condemned to the colony for a livelihood, a mission house and, further inland, the ragged hutments of the black town—these compose Dogao. The whole, surrounded landwards by a semicircle of serrated hills, red-splashed in the sun, and—seawards, by the roaring of distant surf. From where the boat was beached you could just get a glimpse, in the curve of the river, of the open sea, spray-lashed in a white line where the hidden bar made entry of big craft into the stream impossible. Outside the cordon of spray, a coastal steamer hovered, black and smoke-shrouded. It had brought the mails.

The white man, mounting the hot sand from the beached canoe, regarded the black smudge wistfully. Yet, not with an angry wistfulness. Indeed, it boasted a smile. Dogao was a place where smiles were rarely seen. This man, when at intervals he turned his back for a while upon the little settlement, added to that rarity by his absence. Just as, when he returned, so one saw more smiles than usual. The blacks called him "Big Happiness," to interpret more or less literally their jangle of gutturals.

He was greeted, as he strolled into the cool room

of the Dogao Trading Company's building, with a laconic effusiveness by a pallid trio of Europeans, who permitted themselves to betray through their habitual air of tropical lethargy a genuine pleasure at the sight of him.

"Ah! *Ce bon* Johns!"

"Old Johns back again—at last!"

"How do, Johns?"

He smiled on them, shifted his rifle to a more firm position under his armpit and ran his eyes over the pile of mails scattered on the table. It was an action entirely automatic, and cut short almost as soon as taken, almost irritably and as though he had discovered himself in a weakness.

"No letters for you, old chap," said one of the men.

"The less to answer," he laughed. The others sitting round the table laughed too. That was John's well-known formula. It was recognised in the community that, from whoever or wherever he came to Dogao, Johns was a man entirely alone in the world. One of the trio changed the subject abruptly.

"Everything all right—up beyond?" he questioned, with a tilt of his head in what he imagined to be the direction of the river.

"By now—yes."

"What then——?"

“ Small-pox.”

“ We wondered why you were so infernally long ! Began to think something serious had happened——”

“ It was serious enough. I came on it, like a slap in the face, soon as I landed at fifth camp.”

“ Bad ? ”

“ Quite—till I got them well in hand. Fortunately, the medicine chest was new and happened to be well stocked. The village was foetid and rotting when I got there ; but ”—he jerked his rifle under his arm nonchalantly—“ I soon got them licked into manageable shape. It was just a little fatiguing, day and night——”

“ *Nom de Dieu !* I think I should not have bothaired, myself, *mon bon* Johns ! ”

“ It wasn't a bother. Not—exactly. And, you see, they rather trust me, poor devils. They think I am a sort of fetish——”

He laughed rather shamefacedly.

“ And, by Gad, you're all that, old chap ! You're—I don't know what ever keeps you in this infernal hole. A fellow like you——”

“ Talking about a fellow like him—— ! ” barked a man from the other end of the table. “ There's a picture I kept to show him—out of one of the last two batches of London mails——”

He buried his head in a desk, from which after

a moment it emerged, with his hand flourishing a cutting.

“Here it is !” he exclaimed, pointing a finger to the photograph of a man’s head in the middle of a newspaper article which he pushed across the table. “Directly I saw it, I said—if that isn’t Johns, I’ll eat my boots—— !”

The other stood with the slip in his hand, looking down at it with a critical smile of amusement.

“Dant——” he read aloud. “James Dant—well-known financier—killed with French count when motoring——”

“Very obliging sort of death !” he laughed dryly. “Quick and—neat.” He stared closely into the cutting. “Yes, I suppose there is a distinct likeness.”

“We all remarked on it. It’s the living image——”

“Dead image, you mean !” laughed the other, twisting the cutting in and out of his restless fingers, and began to talk suddenly about certain up-river transactions in ivory which he had completed on his trip.

Eventually he passed from the building rather hurriedly to go across to his bungalow for breakfast. He was fearfully hungry, he said.

As a matter of fact, once more out in the glaring heat of the sun, he felt anything but hungry. He

felt curiously ill and faint. Those days and nights spent in an up-river swamp fighting smallpox had severely taxed his strength, even though he had spoken so lightly of it. Perhaps it is the very vastness of Central Africa which seems to ingrain this cult of modesty into the white men who have passed some time in it. They talk little of themselves, either there or thereafter. And, after all, they and their deeds are but mere specks of dust in that great cathedral of Nature.

Beyond recognising vaguely that his eyes were more than usually affected by the shimmering heat-wave that danced before them and blurred their vision, and idly promising himself a good dose of quinine as soon as possible, he had no thought for the monument of fetish worship he had erected for himself in that malodorous swamp village near to fifth camp up the Ogowai.

His mind dwelt upon the cutting that still he twisted between his restless fingers. It was a cutting from a paper quite three months old.

For three months James Dant had been dead.

Despite the sphinx-like smile which had made his face a blank page when he first saw the news, he had been shocked beyond words. Not altogether because his brother was dead. That, of itself, did not surprise him in the least. He had often thought that a man so entirely soulless must soon be cut

off, just in that way—abruptly. That had been the backbone of his belief in the truth of the first supposed death of his brother at sea.

He was shocked because this news had opened up again an old wound he had thought too comfortably bandaged to bleed afresh. Here, far out of the rut of the world, he had lived in convalescence, forgotten, forgetting. Forgetting, that is, as much as possible. Altogether, he could not forget. Always his wound must ache, dully, periodically.

But now, with this news, it had stabbed him afresh with a fierce pain. June was a widow.

That, he had recognised long ago, was a contingency quite possible in the future. And, if and when it happened, it could have made no difference to him. But, he would have preferred never to hear of it, to think of her being free.

On the night that he had crept out of Brazenhurst library window, transformed back into the original Johns with the addition of a sea-stained uncouth suit, he had taken upon himself seriously to lecture his brother over June. Vividly, he had painted for him a picture of the foul thing he had done, in taking this young life in bondage of the marriage laws with no more thought than if he had been buying or selling shares. Delicately he had outlined for his brother's information much of what happened in his absence that affected the

personal intimacy of husband and wife. Of those mad words of his as he carried her up the cliff-side, of that scene at her bed, he had been naturally silent. June in her dramatic interruption of the scene in the library had given him her clear cue for silence as to those unhappy incidents. Without speaking to him, without looking at him, she had flung at him contemptuous command :

“ I have not been troubled in any way with—love. He seems to know—and care—as little about—love as—you or—I ! ”

And in the deliberate, careful closing of the door behind her, she had clearly emphasised the shutting off of the past from the future.

Once, before leaving France for Africa, he had written to her in a moment when his wound was fresh and terrible to bear, and his mind—flung suddenly back from the busy thought of City life to the humdrum idleness of careless existence—was distraught and inclined to hysteria. What he had written in the letter amounted to little beyond such justification of himself as he had thought fit to offer, and a plea that she would forgive him easily as she would forget him.

In return he had received his letter back, a single unsigned sentence written fiercely on the unused paper at the foot of it :

“ Only a hypocrite, while living on the wage

of a woman's shame, would dare ask her forgiveness."

The envelope had been addressed by her to his address in Africa. It was, in fact, awaiting his arrival at Dogao. This fact, taken in conjunction with her message, had intimated to him very clearly that his brother's version of the story, apparently most acceptable to her, had painted him in the least enviable of lights. Which perhaps, he reflected, was for the best.

And so he had left it. Of what use to challenge even that accusation that he lived upon the wage of her shame? It had no foundation of truth. Beyond what money he had taken away with him on that night, he had never drawn a penny of the allowance which his brother sent quarterly to his bank in France. There it accumulated. Some day it would go to a hospital, a charity, some poor soul he might meet who needed it. Himself, he had lived upon the wage he earned here. A small wage, ample for his simple needs. . . . It really made very little difference if his brother had persuaded her to believe what she did. Better that she thought the worst of him, and ended the whole thing so far as she was concerned.

And for himself? In these days he had still something with him of his old mood of the rue Paradise. Life here was one of inertia, punctuated

with rare moments of fierce activity which came as a welcome change. It demanded little of him either mentally or physically. It was, more or less, a dog's life ; and so well suited to such a sorry dog as he. Sometimes now, when he looked back upon that amazing career of his in impersonation of his brother, he was astounded at the audacity and energy he had put into it. Almost, but for the aching wound which June had made of it for him, it might have been an impossible dream.

Not for all the world, at any rate, would he have gone back to it, nor yet had he any hankering after the old life in the burnt-out room at the rue Paradise. That was as degenerating, with its fumes of absinthe and atmosphere of indolent cynicism, as the life in London's great quadrangle of Mammon barter was nerve-racking and soul-crushing. Here neither could one become cynic, nor was there room for the soulless. Here, in this vast cathedral of Nature, of which Dogao was merely the civilising whitewash on the front-door step, it was the cynic who was crushed, whilst the soul felt the greatness of its immortal purpose. It was not the most ideal place in the world. There were those who had named the bar at Dogao " Hell's Portcullis." The heat was stupendous : there was malaria in the mists that drifted up from the river : there were foul things to be met in the forests up-country :

there was Death in every foot of the jungle. But it was all primitive, free, imposing, immense.

This was not a part of the Congo which was a cesspool of horrors. On the contrary, a humane administration gave encouragement to the exercise of kindest intercourse between white and black, rooting out with ruthless hand at the first murmur of report anything which might endanger this policy. And this administration had already approached Johns with a munificent offer, suggesting that he should abandon his trade appointment and take over the district in which, even in this short time, his name had become a byword, his personality a fetish for native worship. "Big Happiness," they called him, from the men who navigated their frail craft over the surf at the mouth of the Ogowai, to the jungle villages on the bank of the Mobangi.

"Big Happiness" he was, saving in such moments as his wound broke out afresh. This morning he felt more fitted to be called "Great Sorrow."

He felt really ill as he came to the neat little garden that bordered his bungalow; and he said to himself that the sun was making him sickly in mind as well as body. What did it matter if James Dant was dead, and his wife—a widow? To him—nothing. With her deliberate, careful closing of

that library door she had emphasised sharply a shutting off of her future from their past.

At which moment, wondering why his native servants seemed diffident in appearing as usual, he looked up at the verandah of his bungalow.

As he stared in surprise, a woman rose from the *chaise longue* in which she had been sitting. She wore white, with a touch of black at her slender throat. Under her white solar topee gleamed hair, copper-gold, like the rays of an angry sunset.

XX

SACRIFICE

HE mounted the verandah steps without speaking.

He noticed, with a sudden and almost painful realisation of the grotesque, that his servants' heads, mouths all furiously agape, peered in an awkward bundle round a corner of the bungalow wall. White women were practically unknown at Dogao.

Himself, it was only when he chanced to recollect his glimpse of the smoky smudge which was the coastal steamer at the bar that he understood how this one could possibly have found her way to his bungalow.

"I hope you have not been waiting—long?" he enquired gravely and entirely on a note which he might have used if they had met but yesterday and he had been actually expecting her this morning. Life in Central Africa quite obliterates surprise from the gamut of human emotions.

"Only a few minutes," she replied. "The—Customs officer, isn't it?—very kindly saw me ashore and brought me to your—house. He said he expected you were at an—office, and would look in and see if he could find you."

"I expect we missed each other," he said. "There is a shorter cut than the way by which I came. But—it's rather hot out here. Won't you——?"

He indicated in a gesture the cool room to be seen through the gauze curtain, which he lifted punctiliously.

She stepped inside. It was a room, like most bachelor quarters in the tropics, scantily furnished. A table was laid crudely for breakfast. The sight of it seemed to increase her obvious embarrassment.

"I—I have come a long way to see you," she faltered, looking round her with some helplessness, and at him with a sudden light of pitiful appeal in her eyes.

"I suppose I should say that I am——" he began, but she cut him short with a gesture.

"Oh, please do not let us talk platitudes!" she begged nervously. "I didn't come to do that."

"I suppose not."

He seemed to understand instinctively that she would prefer not to be asked to take a chair, of which there were several inviting use. And, since therefore he could not very well seat himself, the curious swimming sensation in his head obliged him to lean slightly on the table for support. It placed him at some distance from her.

"I heard only this morning of your great loss," he said with an awkward slowness. "Scarcely an

hour ago, in fact. One gets the—home papers only every month or so ; and I—have been for some time away in the interior. I only returned this morning. A man in the—office showed me James' picture in an old journal—prompted by noticing the extraordinary likeness——”

He stumbled to an embarrassing silence, which they both seemed curiously, nervously unable to break. Presently, she said on a broken note as though her lips were intensely dry :

“ Yes. My husband is dead.”

“ An accident. Terrible ! ”

“ Terrible—yes. But—not an accident.”

“ No ? ”

“ That was only the—public version of it. The real facts . . . It happened on that curved piece of road leading into Brazenhurst. The car—the Comte de Louvre was driving it—the car went over the cliff-side. . . . Ja——, my husband, was not killed outright. He lingered for a few hours—long enough to tell me confidentially how it happened. . . . They had been quarrelling. . . . He struck the Comte—rather heavily, and his weak heart. . . . With no hand at the wheel, the car swerved round and pitched headlong. . . . ”

“ Dreadful ! ”

“ The Count, it seemed, had—my husband rather in his power. From what my husband told me,

though other things were concerned in their association, the Count knew—about my husband's visit to America—the whole story——”

“That is so.”

“He had blackmailed him till—it became unbearable. I understand it had reached a pitch which involved—even me. The Count imagined that, because in a few moments of weakness and—intense loneliness, I——”

“You need not tell me. Nobody understood the Comte as entirely as I did. I suppose, this culminating demand so exasperated James that——?”

She nodded. He laughed grimly.

“It was the one thing I forgot when I—handed over,” he said, using the expression which came easiest because of its daily appliance locally in connection with his work, and hoping inwardly that she would not attach any personal slight to its adoption. “In the hurry of leaving, and the unusual circumstances, it slipped my memory to tell James of the Comte. Probably, too, mainly because I had myself effectively silenced him——”

“You?” She was genuinely astonished.

“At the lifting of my finger,” he said, “I could have put the hangman's noose round the Comte's neck.”

He said it quietly, without any attempt at effect. But the news came to her like a bombshell. She

looked away from him hurriedly as if afraid of what might lie behind his pale, serious face, a mask that hid so much latent strength, such widespread roots of knowledge. He went on talking :

“ I expect de Louvre discovered—he knew one unfailing proof as to which was my brother and which I—that an exchange had been effected. Possibly he found out from James that I was well out of the way. . . . So he is dead ! Well, one need not profess sorrow.”

A silence fell between them. Again that curious swimming sensation leaped into his eyes. His rifle fell with a clatter against the table.

“ You are—ill ? ” she exclaimed impulsively.

He laughed, dropping his hand from before his eyes.

“ Oh, no ! It is heat—heat. That is all. It is very—liverish in the interior, you know. I have just come up from there this morning.”

“ You work very hard,” she said.

He looked across at her with surprise.

“ Not more than anyone else,” he laughed.

“ But with better results. You have a great reputation here.”

“ Then—our friend of the customs has been drawing the long bow ! ”

“ No,” she said. “ But I heard a great deal about you from one of the secretaries to the colony. He

came from Loango on the boat. That is how I was able to get ashore here. His kind influence——”

He was about to tell her that she had better never have come. Somehow the sight of her dainty coolness seemed to anger him. For some inexplicable woman's reason, she was torturing him with her presence. Torturing him almost beyond human endurance. He was on the verge of demanding her reason for this visit and asking her to be gone quickly, when she spoke.

“ I hear that you are wanted to take a post under the Government, that you are so wonderful with the natives, a sort of god——”

He laughed impatiently.

“ You have heard a lot of nonsense about me.”

“ Good—kind—nonsense.”

“ But—nonsense. Out here, these secretaries and people have so little to do and so much time in which to talk that they are apt to become rather mixed in their proportions.”

“ The skipper of the boat knew quite a lot about you, and a dark man on board told us several stories about things you had done among the natives in the—bush, is it?—big things, fine things. He said the natives called you something that meant ‘ Big Happiness ’——”

“ Their idea of a joke ! ” he laughed. “ Natives have no sense of humour.”

“ You are happy here ? ” she questioned abruptly.

He had been staring idly through the gauze **chick** over the door where the waves of hot air shimmered in the white blaze, tantalising his tired eyes ; but, at her question, he looked her suddenly and sternly in the face.

“ Have you come all this distance to ask me that ? ” he demanded.

“ Yes.”

“ Why ? ”

“ Because I—had to—be quite sure.”

“ With what object ? ” Despite his restraint, sarcasm curled his lower lip at which, as though to hide it and maybe from sheer habit, he began to fumble with his nervous fingers.

She sank suddenly into a chair close behind her, her white hands creeping along its broad arms. As he stood, her solar topee hid her face from him.

“ I owe it to you,” she said hoarsely. “ Before he died, my—husband made many things plain to me. It was a sort of death-bed confession. I think, with Death waiting for him, he—saw things clearly. He said that, while he was lying under the car before they found him, his whole life had been—like a picture on a screen, and he felt—who can tell exactly what the dying feel over their missed opportunities ? He told me then the whole story

of your life, the real story of how you and he came to——”

She seemed to wait for him to come to her aid at this reference to that past upon which she had closed the library door. But he remained motionless, silent, staring impatiently at the bluewashed wall in front of him.

“It was a very different story from that which he had given me—when he first came back. It was a story which, with all its wild, thoughtless origin, was full of amazing genius, wonderful daring,” she continued, unable altogether to conceal in her voice the rising waves of emotion that laboured in her. “I can see the whole story now. It should properly have come to an end after that last night in Paris. But that would have meant a tragic end in—poverty—for me ; and so, it ran on. Knowing now all that lay in the background, so much of its incident is clear to me that was once a mystery, so much light that was darkness, so much wonder and thankfulness that was shame.”

He flung out an arresting gesture.

“Please——” he said. “It cannot surely be kind to—either of us if you have come all this distance merely to reassure my mind——”

“He—James—begged me to try to see you, to tell you something of what he felt when he died, to find out if you were well and happy——”

"Well, you have found me. I am"—he passed a fitful hand over his forehead that had suddenly begun furiously to ache, and laughed—"I am—moderately well—a little liverish perhaps."

"And—happy?" She winced under the lash of his laugh.

"Why not?" he asked quietly, with a strong control over himself. "Why should I not be happy. This is my life. The wise man sees to it that he makes his life happy. And—they have told you what the natives call me?"

As he smiled down at her he saw the sudden rush of tears well up in her eyes. The white hands of her went swiftly to her face. She cowered in her chair, shaking under a tornado of sobbing.

"Good lord!" he muttered, taken aback and vaguely uncertain what to do, or say.

"Look here, you know," he stammered presently. "You mustn't——"

She flung to her feet, dabbing at her eyes with a kerchief.

"You are not happy! You know you are not! You are talking to me now as you used to talk when you were—unreal—living a lie. For God's sake—now that that is all behind us—can't we look each other honestly in the face and talk truth—honest truth? Do I pretend to you that I am happy? No, in God's name—no! Happy? How could

it be possible? Any thought, any hope of happiness went from me on that dreadful night. . . . You took all my happiness away with you. Won't you give it me back? Won't you let me give you back yours? I will mend it of its bruises. I will make it strong and good and lovely again, as it was when you carried me up the cliff——"

"Don't! Don't!" he muttered hoarsely. "You mustn't talk like that. Just as I loved you then, so—now. But——"

"And I have never ceased to love you. No, not even when I made myself say I hated you. You say you have seen to it that you have made your life happy. Perhaps you have, in a way. Men can. But—not women. How can I make my life happy, by ever so little, when you are all my life and are taken from me? You must give me back my life, my happiness, your love! I can't go on! I can't go on another day, another hour! You must let me stay here with you, forgetting everything that has been but just our love for each other. You must send—somebody for my things to the boat. They are all ready. You see—I knew, I knew there could be no other way. I knew that a love like yours would still be mine. I knew you would——"

He held her hands in his, pressing her gently back.

"We must not be tempted, dear Heart," he said

softly. "It's all so true. It's all what we most want. It is the one thing we must not do. Don't, for God's sake, tempt me. We—you and I—love each other. The thought of our love is my heaven upon earth. But, do you think I would let you throw away the rest of your young life just out of that selfish side of my love that craves for, demands your nearness to me? Do you think I would let you really link your life with that of—you do not understand, dear Heart, even yet what I am, what my life must always be."

"The life of—Big Happiness!" she smiled up at him.

He shook his head.

"The life of a shiftless, ne'er-do-well fellow, a rascally, move-along merchant, who is here to-day and there to-morrow. Caring, indeed, nothing at all about to-morrow, selfish——"

"Untruths! Untruths!" she pleaded.

He turned away his eyes from her lovely face, her lips moist and red as blush roses at dawn, her eyes full of the exquisite yearning of love. -

"You must go away, go back to your boat," he commanded curtly. "You must! In the name of our Love, you must! Nothing will ever persuade me to let you do anything else. I love you too well. When you think over it, you will understand it was for our Love's sake I made you. A man like

myself—a born rascal, a consummate hypocrite, a rogue adventurer, a man who——”

“ My man ! My man ! ” he heard her whisper ; and, reeled suddenly, clutching the table. The dizziness, the pain in his head, the sudden burning in his throat had him beaten. In a mirror on a wall he caught a flashing glimpse of his face, its deathly pallor——

“ What is it ? ” he heard her saying, and beat her suddenly back with fierce hands.

Their talk, their love, the problem at the back of both had fallen abruptly into the background. The vitals of him were racked with sudden, stabbing pains. His limbs seemed all on fire and scorched. Vividly, he summed up the symptoms, which but a few days back he was fighting frenziedly in panic-stricken niggers in the swamp village at fifth camp. . . . It was surely not possible, he wondered, that, after so many days, some germ of infection had budded into life in him ?

“ Dear Love ! You are ill ? ” he heard her pleading, and staggered back, pointing weakly towards the door.

“ You must go as quickly as possible. Do you hear me ? Get back to the boat, and take quinine—plenty of it. I am . . . I was a fool not to have thought of warning you before. But the sight of you put everything else out of my mind . . . I have

been up in the interior curing natives of smallpox——”

“ Smallpox ? ” she whispered, pale and alert.

“ I think—I am afraid—I must have taken it myself. The symptoms——”

From the chair into which he had sunk, he saw that she was crossing the room towards him.

“ Go ! For God’s sake, go ! ” he shrieked at her. “ Every moment you stay——”

She had kneeled in front of him, he too weak to battle with her young strength. She had his pallid, pain-twisted face held fast between her cool white hands.

“ If you have smallpox, I stay, and you won’t be able to prevent me,” she said, and kissed him on the mouth.

XXI

HONEYMOON

THE pleasant-faced old Father at the Mission had united them with the blessing of the Almighty. According to what ritual, how could it matter? Rituals are the footpads that have crept too long into the doors of the Christian Church and stolen of its souls abundantly for the devil.

The sanction of God was the main matter ; and, after that, urgency.

It was thought he would die. During a few lucid moments at the crisis, she had knelt at his bedside, and the tie been knotted. Afterwards, he and she had gone on with their fight against Death.

And won, narrowly but surely.

He was at first afraid, after his awakening from a healthy sleep, to ask her if that bedside ceremony was dream, or reality. He was terribly ashamed of himself when she showed him her ringed third finger, fresh new gold brought by runner from Franktown. He said he had been morally weak. He being still physically weak, she kissed him a hundred times whether he would, or not ; and then, scolded him.

He was allowed to say nothing, to think nothing of the future, which was in God's hands.

Meantime, he was in her care. Convalescent, though still far from well, she had him taken aboard the coasting steamer. She would not tell him where they were going. A good long holiday, she said. For the rest, the administration offered him afresh, through the governor, a newly created appointment in the colony if he could be persuaded to come back with his health regained. It was an offer with a large sphere of usefulness and, maybe, a brilliant future. He had promised, at her insistence, to think it over.

But on the steamer deck had protested :

" You can't possibly live your life in a dreadful place like this ! "

" Where you can live, I can live," she answered.

He pointed down to the line of surf at the bar outside Dogao.

" You know what they call that ? " he said.

" ' Hell's Portcullis ! ' It's true enough, so far as Dogao goes. But, since you came in by it, I think we will rechristen it ' Heaven's Gates.' "

And, laughing, she had reminded him suddenly.

" I almost feel that I must rechristen you," she said. " Somehow—with that name James always in my mind—I find it difficult and awkward to be calling you—John. It seems curiously—unreal.

I have been thinking, I must use that native name for you. My Big Happiness. . . . Ah, how very big a thing happiness can be if we only know it ! ”

Happiness was theirs as the boat carried them northwards through the sun-kissed waters round the African coast. He was still weak and needing care, though picking up wonderfully in the salt air of the sea, even if the heat rather retarded his progress.

She kept him still as an invalid. She said he was now on his way from the church door. The honeymoon had not yet begun. It was her whim that he should begin it strong and well.

“ And where is this precious honeymoon to begin ? ” he chaffed her perpetually.

It was not until they reached Genoa, that she gave him a hint.

“ The papers say that Interlaken is full ! ” she exclaimed petulantly, and in his sharp little shout of surprise realised that she had given away her secret.

“ It was where I first knew that you loved me,” she whispered, snuggling close to him as the Swiss express carried them northward at fierce speed.

And at not too fierce a speed for these two, ahungered of each other, restless, exchanging covert glances like child lovers, fearful of being caught in their thoughts.

The train brought them in as the Jungfrau was bathed in the white glare of a full moon. The great white amphitheatre towered above them, colossal, cold.

“Up there”—she pointed to the nether gradients of the peak—“up there—you once lectured me upon Death!”

And she laughed.

“To-morrow we will go up there again, and you shall tell me all about Life,” she whispered. “Life and Love and—Big Happiness.”

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